

BHOLANATH BHATTACHARYA

SOME ASPECTS OF THE
ESOTERIC CULTS OF
CONSORT WORSHIP
IN BENGAL

A FIELD SURVEY REPORT

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Consort Worship in Bengal : A Field Survey Report

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To Shaktinath Jha,
an absolute ordainer in the
arena of esoteric cult,
a dedicator for good to the
cause of Bauls and Fakirs

The present field survey report was published in 1977 in Folklore, the only English monthly on the subject.

Starting the work before long, it seemed inviolable to continue for obvious reasons. Late Gourkishore Ghosh and his father late Girijananda Atmadarshan tried heartily at that time to eradicate those hindrances and guided the entire work properly. Incidentally, late Atmadarshanji was host himself a highly gifted practitioner in the role of sexuality in meditative cult.

The innate prowess of 'Monfakira' amazed me for their delving attempt.

Dated the 15th December, 2012

Bholanath Bhattacharya

The terracotta Yakshinis or nymph type of idols/images belonging to the Sunga and the Kushana era form the most distinctive class of archaeological finds unearthed from West Bengal, with regard to both their frequency and numerical strength as well as their variety and complexity. The preponderance of this type of images obviously indicates that at least during the period of the three centuries from the 2nd century BC to the 1st century AD, to which they relate, if not since before as well as considerably afterwards, the people of Bengal were given to worshipping and invoking the deities represented by these images in various forms the precise significance of which has been lost to the subsequent generations.

The Yakshinis represent a uniquely interesting category of anthropomorphic figures excavated from various ancient sites of North and North-Eastern India in general and Bengal in particular. A full and true exposition of their nature and meaning by placing them in their true social perspective is, however, yet to take place. A good deal has no doubt been written by scholars of art appreciation and allied branches of ancient history on their artistic or aesthetic aspects such as their pronounced and obtrusive physical attributes, the suggested mood and idiom of expression as well as the subtlety of their lascivious communication. But it may not

perhaps be wrong to say that little has so far been offered by way of explaining or even suggesting their functional identity and the nature of their relevance to those sections of the community with whom they were closely associated. In dealing with the subject of these idols little attention has been paid to the details of their typological and structural variations or to an analysis of the pietistic or other implications of such variations. It has on the other hand been deemed adequate merely to postulate a fundamentally dichotomous division of all idols into two types, namely, the Deva or divine type and its opposite, and to place the Yakshinis in the later category in the company of sundry others. In thus viewing them, possibly without any firmly tenable basis, as a genre of female forms quite beyond the purview of and contrary to or even conceptually diametrically opposite to the worshippable forms of female divinities, including the Matrikas, it was facilely presumed that the Yakshinis represented little but an embodiment of the baser propensities of man to seek sensual pleasure and occasionally also the aesthetic, if not the erotic, fancies of man delighting in the contemplation of nymph-like beings in lewd and obscene attitudes, possibly also remotely connected with man's penchant for grotesque forms.

It is time that this information, knowledge or insight placed at our disposal by the advances made so far in various disciplines be pooled together and employed to a thorough review. The kind of facile categorization of the Yakshinis into a clear-cut set of non-divine figures representing more of the aesthetic, the Epicurean or, simply the erotic than the spiritual, the devotional or the ritualistic in mankind. The present study does by no means claim to

provide a complete or even satisfactory answer to this challenging task, nor is it possible to do so within the limited scope of such an exercise. What is aimed at is to focus the attention of the readers, on certain aspects of these images, especially those connected with their structure and types, and also to suggest an alternative line of analysis of their social significance with reference to the known trends of the various esoteric religious cults of Bengal.

It may be emphasized at the outset that the Yakshini type of figurines as recovered from various parts of Bengal and other regions of India display a wider inter-regional, intra-regional and, possibly temporal and typological variations, and are also endowed with typical and specific features and stances that can hardly be dismissed as being devoid of any symbolism or inner significance but mere product of chance as opposed to design. The present searcher has had occasions to study these figurines closely, and the impression was forced on him that these are not all that secular in nature as has so long been presumed. He was particularly seized with an urge to test this impression in the light of the observation made in connection with another line of sociological inquiry being carried on by him, namely, that into a particular cult of consort worship. The results of that exercise, though hardly conclusive to clinch the issue, were fairly satisfactory to generate as inner conviction that these idols were, in the remote past, intimately and ritualistically connected with a kind of obscurantist and esoteric cult.

In this connection it may not be out of place to recapitulate the salient features of the development of the traditional cult of consort worship and the erotic devotional cults in and around Bengal. It is generally admitted that the pri-

mordial cult of the worship of the female sex is the source of fertility and other benignant influences or powers, especially in the familiar form of Matrika worship, was prevalent in certain parts of India, including Bengal, since long before the advent of the predominantly patriarchal Aryan civilisation. It is also an accepted fact that the region comprising Bengal and its surrounding areas in what is today North-Eastern India, Nepal, Tibet was the abode of many primeval communities firmly believing in and practising a host of magico-religious cults associated with not only the fertility cult but also the eradication, conquest, subjugation or containment of hostile or unpleasant powers, the propitiation of the pleasant powers and appeasement of the elemental forces the presiding deities of natural calamities and the potent arbiters of man's fate and livelihood, the humbling of inimical human or sub-human adversaries, and so on and so forth. These cults postulated a belief in the existence of various classes of occult creatures and subtle forces possessing a great deal of supernatural powers of control over and interference in the earthly life of human beings. To establish an occult nexus with one or more of them according to the dictates of one's necessity or fancy for the purpose of achieving any of the aforesaid objects with its help or agency constituted the aim of practising these cults. Owing to the fairly wide prevalence of such practices, it was not frequently deemed to be necessary to resort to them, if only for defensive purposes. At times and in certain regions a proficiency in such arts of black magic and a convincing display of superiority in supernatural feats even proved to be an indispensable key to the conquest of credulous minds in the context of an exercise in religious conversion of the

masses, as in the 11th century Tibet during the visit of Atish Sreejnan Deepankar or the Bengal of the Middle Ages on the advent of the Muslim Pirs and Fakirs.

It is possibly in the twin contests of the said tradition of feminine worship and the practising of various magico-religious rites connected with supra-physical and occult beings and forces that the origin and evolution of the cult of the Yakshinis may best be appreciated. On the one hand it was only one step from the worship of the maternal form of femininity to the sensual worship of female form per excellence; on the other it was in the fitness of things as well as in keeping with the tradition of the worship and invocation of supernatural beings and forces that similarly potent supernatural powers and design should be attributed to this new genre of female worshipables, whom it was being sought to propitiate and please by a spiritualised demonstration of male vigour and erotic prowess no less than by the chanting of sacred formulae and other rites as aided by contemplative exercises.

The adoration and worship of female being no doubt sprang from the awe and admiration that the mysterious association of woman with the procreative process came to inspire in the primitive man, who naturally regarded the female species as the symbol of the secret forces of creativity and fertility. At the outset this reverential feeling expressed itself through the worship of womanhood viewed as the Mother figure, as one giving birth to as well as nursing and protecting the world. It was at a subsequent stage probably in the wake of the discovery by man of his own so-ordinately active role in the procreative process, that he might have become aware of the urge and necessity to view the act of

creation as a joint venture in which the female partner was still found to play the more active, responsible onerous role and therefore was entitled to homage from the male partner no less than from the offsprings. In this changed context the emphasis came to be shifted from the role of woman as the sole cause of creation to that as the more important of the instruments of the reproductive process. The role of man being simultaneously recognised, the female came to be regarded not only as the Mother figure but also as the Wife or Consort figure. Previously man used to view himself (as well as all created beings) as emanating from a Mother figure that did not have to depend on the co-operation or aid on the part of any other agency for the purpose of procreation. But now man had the necessary knowledge to view himself as being connected with the productive cycle at both the ends, that is, as the cause as well as the effect of the process. As the realisation of this changed and widened role dawned on him, man, though still regarding the woman figure as nonetheless worthy of devotion and worship, chose to worship her in a form that not only accepted and explicitly displayed the co-ordinate role of man in the crucial act that elevated woman into the category of worshipable objects but also portrayed or symbolised her qualities (physical and aesthetic) and functionalities associated with this act. As a corollary the connected rites and formulae too came to indicate an eagerness to propitiate the female divinity by a sublimated display of manliness as seen in the context of the act of procreation.

In this connection we may recall some of the important aspects of the known history of the cults of Bengal on which the cult of Yakshini seems to have a bearing. While a host

of other animate, inanimate and celestial objects as well as unseen forces have claimed quite a sizable share of the pietistic, religious and spiritual emotions, contemplations and endeavours of the people of Bengal, one of the marked features of the evolution of the religious cults of Bengal and the neighbouring regions has been the worship of the female divinities in various forms and in various contexts and with various objectives. Some of the better known of these divinities no doubt represent the motherly aspects. But at the same time there are also others which involve, implicitly or in subtle manner, if also occasionally in a more blatant fashion, the worship of the Wife figure itself, either as forming part of a pair of rapturously united divinities or as the unpretentiously selected partner in the act of a sort of sublime sexual union contemplated and conducted as a part of secret religious practices and as a means of spiritual attainment. The worship of such divine pairs as Sree Krishna and Sree Radha or Lord Shiva and Durga etc., belongs to the first category. However, it is the Radha-Krishna pair of united divinities which more aptly sums up the spirit behind the worship of couples. So far as Bengal is concerned, there is but little novelty in the concept of a united pair of divinities as such, which is a reflection of the Purusha-Prakriti concept of Sankhya school of philosophy and has been widely recognised and popularised by the Puranic Brahminical ideology, being based on the postulate of the mutually complementary roles of the two sexes. But the concept of womanhood as the ultimate cause of creation and the fundamental source of power is admittedly a product of the Matriarchal, non-Aryanised, primitive and Tantra-oriented society of Bengal. It reflects a profoundly realistic and

worldly concern with the elemental energy generated by the sex impulse and the reverential recognition of woman's role in procreating and protecting the species. The essential co-operation between the two sexes in the act of procreation has, by a process of pragmatic thinking, been easily extended in the field of occult practices for the purpose of gaining control over the body as well as the attainment of supra-physical power and material well-being. While the interplay of the mutual attraction of the sexes (representing opposite concepts) has been viewed as being at the root of creation, it has at the same time assiduously been sought to overcome and exceed the said urge and reach a stage of eternal bliss beyond it by first kindling the senses only to sublimate the same. The Bengali genius has, so to say, given a new turn to the Sankhyaite concept of Purusha and Prakriti, hardly to the liking of Aryavarta, through this Tantric emphasis on the co-operation on the part of the female sex-partner in the practice of esoteric cults as a means of spiritual attainment as opposed to an unmitigated and inconsistent indulgence in the sexual act. In fact the history of the multifarious esoteric cults flourishing in Bengal and the neighbouring regions during the period from the 9th century to the 16th century or even beyond is largely a translation in one form or other of this basic concept of sect worship of the female partner through a complex of rituals involving sublimated sex with or without the act of perilously controlled copulation. What used to be implicit in the subtle worship of the pair of rapturously united divinities gradually became pronounced and explicit in subsequently developed cults that enjoined the Sadhaka to identify himself with the male deity of the said pair of

divinities or even straightway to establish a sublimated communion with the female partner in terms of secret rites and formulae etc., and as a part of a necessary process of realising the secrets of creation and thereby attain spiritual elevation and powers.

The relevance of the Yakshini cult to the scheme of the pietistic evolution of Bengalis may best be appreciated in the light of the aforesaid observations. It is the considered view of the present searcher that the Yakshinis stand for neither a set of idle play things of the past nor a class of decorative dolls, nor even a genre of erotically motivated or fancied functional adult dolls but actually constitute a very special class of objects of worship, female in sex, with an esoterically erotic and ritualistic association with the worshipper, and thus represent a peculiar folk cult of a bygone age which, though no longer existent in its native form, has yet succeeded in surviving through centuries in its essential spirit in the form of the various esoteric consort-worshipping or female divinity worshipping cults (aristocratic, folk, mixed, or synthesised in character) that arose in and around Bengal during the Middle Ages. The origin and development of the cult of the Yakshinis is now as good as lost to us. There still are, however, followers of certain esoteric cults that can perhaps reasonably be traced back to Yakshini cults or at least to cults of a similar kind, just as there are a host of other related secret cults involving the association of a female partner with an implicit or explicit reference to the role of sublimated sex in attaining spiritual bliss or power. But these distorted and transmuted remnants or distant offsprings of the Yakshini cult or cults related to it, an observation of which may yield valuable clues to a reconstruction of the cult

in its original form, are, however, confined to only a handful of the followers of esoteric cults who strictly and closely guard or disguise the secrets of their path. That the profound implications and hidden meaning of the typological distinctions and the structural aspects of the sculpture of the Yakshini figurines as well as the rites and formulae associated with the present-day descendants of the cult are no longer obvious to even the scholars goes to show how deeply has this cult gone underground or suffered distortion, disintegration and setback.

The inquiry conducted by the present searcher into a related line of study led him to conclude that the Yakshinis did once form the focal point of a cult involving three related sets of beliefs and practices that subsequently came to inspire and even engulf the cults arising in Bengal and the neighbouring regions during the Middle Ages. These are firstly a belief in and the practice of magico-religious rites connected with fertility and the like, as referred to at the outset, and secondly the worship of female divinities logically related to the Matrikas but coming at a subsequent stage of development, and thirdly the practice of an esoteric cult with the collaboration and direct participation of the female partner, the main part of which concerns the sexual act, if only in a sublimated form.

In the remote past, probably in course of the aggression launched with complete or partial success by the marching aristocratic Aryan regions from the North and the West, the Yakshini cult, like many other native primitive folk cults, was forced to make a retreat and ceased to be practised in the public. The Aryan religions even absorbed the Yakshinis into their own pantheon, when these came to be identified

with Lakshmi, Sree, Padma and similar other female deities. Despite this absorption, however, the Yakshini cult itself did not die or dry up altogether but merely lay low and went underground, awaiting an opportune moment to re-emerge on the surface, if only in a transmutedly different guise. Like similar other deeply ingrained primeval cults, its perennial source of strength and stamina was the ineffable predilection of the folk people of this region for the modes of worship underlying this cult. The supercilious Aryan religions naturally disapproved of this native traits and practices, that seemed gruesome to them and offended their sense of morality and did not agree at all with their concept of spirituality. So after they succeeded in converting the local folks to the Aryan religions, they tried their best to generate an abhorrence of such practices among the erstwhile followers of them. But sooner or later the point was reached when the expansive Aryan religion had to make many suitable concessions in regard to the primitive non-Aryan beliefs, rites, customs etc., including those underlying the Yakshini cult, in order that a larger section of the folk people could be brought within the fold of the new religion or, in some cases, to counteract the tangential inclination of the neophytes to break away the relapse into their old religious habits and rituals. It is the lower echelons of the Aryan religions that had been thronged into by the non-Aryan native population, mostly under duress. It is significant that most of the rigid restrictions and prescriptions laid by these religions especially during the stage at which they became conservative in the face of a challenge posed by another religion, were meant for the so-called lower classes. However, the instinct for self-preservation and expansion

ultimately compelled these religions to come to terms with reality and make patchwork of compromises with the traditional folk beliefs and practices. It is thus the suppressed folk cults had an opportunity to make a re-appearance, if only in a slightly disguised and trans-muted form. As the neophytes secretly but stubbornly clung to their traditional beliefs, concepts, rituals and even deities, the only course left open for the aristocratic religions to attract new comers or effect a smooth integration of the neophytes as well as to keep them firmly within the bounds of these religions was to agree to retain these adjuncts of the primitive cults in past and to amalgamate, absorb, modify and synthesise them and thereby assimilate and incorporate their essence and form in the body of the Aryan religion in consonance with the latter's aptitude, disposition, norms and need. As enlargement of the following of the Aryan religion necessarily entailed a dilution of the principles and concepts forming the core of that religion and the resultant compound represented a synthesis of the two religions in which the re-emergent ingredients of the old religion could no longer be expected to be available or active in their original form and spirit or with their native vigour in act.

The re-emergence of the Yakshini cult after an interval of possibly several centuries also did not take place in its original form or all at once. We have already noted that this cult has three components, namely, magical rites, female worship, and spiritual practices and rites with the help of participation of a female partner with special emphasis on the sublimated sexual act as a means of spiritual attainment. For reasons not precisely known to us but which must presumably have been connected with the staunchly dis-

approving attitude of the puritanic Aryan religions, this cult was obliged to disappear from the surface life of the community, though being hiddenly practised in an amalgamated and synthesised form and kept in suspended animation. It was during this prolonged period of eclipse and a sort of transmuted existence that the said components probably came to disintegrate, and when the opportune moment for revival came these individual parts, though interlinked, did not come to the surface all at once but one after another and in a disjointed fashion. It took several more centuries for a full-fledged synthesis of various cults and religious theories and principles to take place which represented an assimilation among other things, of the said three components of the Yakshini cult. But it is needless to say that the original compact form of the cult was no more available, the Yakshini having merged her identity in various Hindu and other aristocratic deities.

Let us see how these ingredients of the Yakshini cult registered a revival in course of the evolution, development and mutual interaction of the various cults of Bengal. The two main streams of aristocratic and aggressive Aryan religions which at outset subdued or drove the native cults underground were Buddhism and Brahminism. In course of time, however, both these religions had to make truce with the ineradically ingrained traditional native cults and make room for many of their rites, beliefs, deities etc. if only after subjecting them to a process of assimilation and transmutation. These two aristocratic religions also had their own rivalry and clash between themselves as well as the inevitable process of interaction and synthesis.
. (Read the entire book)