



Yoginis: The Mysterious Strand.

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ABSTRACT

The yoginis are female ascetics, considered to be the attendants or the 'entourage' of Shakti, the main goddess. Popularly known as "Chausath Yoginis", the number sixty-four, however, is given for the sake of convenience. While the Mahamaya temple of Hirapur houses a shrine of sixty-four yoginis, the Bedhaghat, Jabalpur temple has a shrine of 81. Most of these temples of yoginis are geographically scattered and are found in sparsely inhabited areas. The patronage of most of these temples remains unknown due to the fear of the wrath of yoginis. The condition, sculptural features, and architecture such as the open roof of these temples suggest that they were places of tantric practices as well. Hereby indicating a link between the tantric and the yogini worship. However, It is not only in India where yoginis are revered but also in other countries like Nepal where they are associated with tantric and Buddhist healing practices. Through the methodology of historical research, the paper attempts to trace the history of the cult of yoginis through the study of various primary and secondary sources. In this way, it seeks to highlight the treatment of feminine energy of the Yoginis and the parallels they have with different traditions such as Buddhism. It would also analyze to what extent they resonate with tantrism. Thus, the study of the cult of yoginis through this paper will be an attempt to unveil the mysteries and the folklore that are attached



to them. The paper would also provide a contemporary analysis of the cult of the yogini in India with that of Nepal where Buddhist and Hindu traditions seem to intermingle. Hereby, highlighting the interconnectedness in the history of traditions of South Asia.

Introduction:

Yoginis: The Mysterious Strand

The worship of Shakti or goddesses is a widespread Hindu phenomenon. Various scholarly opinions have been debated regarding the origins of Shaktism and the symbolism of the goddess, who is often represented as counterpart to the trinity. However, what is least discussed is the worship of feminine energy that is distinct and one that does not conform to the stereotypical notions of a ‘mother goddess’. These are the Yoginis, popularly known as *Chausanth Yoginis*; their sculptures are found in various temples, predominantly in Central India, located in sparse and inaccessible areas. The origin of the cult of Yoginis is said to have started in the early medieval period and remained largely focused in central India, where the extant temple architecture dates between the 10th and 13th centuries.

The knowledge about the Yoginis remains largely esoteric; even talking about them is considered as inviting their wrath upon an uninitiated person. Poems like *Lalita Sahasranama*, present in *Brahmanda Purana* end with a caution that anyone who transmits knowledge about the Yoginis to an uninitiated person would suffer the wrath of the Yoginis, indicating the reason behind the secrecy of their cult.

The word *Yogini* has different connotations – ‘union or the power of union’ or female devotee, attendants of Durga, or consort of a god. The cult of Yoginis is neglected among medieval religious practices, and the extant information about them remains scattered and undocumented. Those available are sources carrying *Yogini namavalis* i.e., lists carrying the names of different yoginis. Though mentioned as 64, the *Yogini namavalis* present in different Puranas do not reconcile, thus indicating whether these Yoginis carried different names or had no fixed number. The origin of the Yoginis is obscure. A study of the origin of their cult in Orissa reveals that it was a part of the third phase of the evolution of Shaktism, the first two being *Mahishamardini* and *Matrikas*, respectively. While another line of the debate argues that Yoginis were human beings who were said to be possessed by the Goddess and were then raised to a divine status. This argument fits somewhat appropriately with the cult of *Mayoginis* in Nepal, which is later elaborated upon in the paper, representing syncretism between the Tantric Buddhist and Hindu Traditions.



The *Matrikas* or the ‘seven mother goddesses’ (sometimes eight in number) are associated with being the closest antecedents of the Yoginis. *Camunda* is considered to be the earliest presiding deity of the *Saptamatrikas*, and these goddesses are often seen in a ‘yogasana pose’. Moreover, some of the yogini images, both at Mahamaya temple, Hirapur, and Ranipur-Jharial, are identified to be six out of seven known Saptamatrikas; however, it is debatable among scholars. Though some sculptures resemble them, they are not essentially *Matrikas* because the Saptamatrika worship in Orissa is a popular practice, contrary to the secrecy attached to the yoginis.

Furthermore, except for the example of the Chamunda matrika (figure 56) sculpture of the Mahamaya temple at Hirapur, no other resemblance among the sculptures of the two strands of Shaktism can be traced, which might indicate an attempt at assimilation and legitimization of the Yogini cult within the larger realm of Hinduism. It is also in the Ranipur-Jharial temple that yoginis are depicted as naked with protruding features like the Vulva, indicating linkages to the fertility cult. The most extensive information about the cult of yoginis is provided by the text ‘*Kularnavatantra*’ belonging to the Kaula Tantra school, written in *Sandha bhasha*, only readable to the initiates of the Kaula school. The Yogini-Kaula established by Matsyendra-Nath, also known as ‘*Luipa*’ in Tibet, meaning one of the traditional eighty-four mahasiddhas showcases links common to the women in tantric Buddhism and Hinduism, this syncretism resulted in the growth of the *Sahajiya* cult of Buddhism, essentially described as an esoteric yogic cult in the subsequent centuries. The *Kularnavatantra* text, however, is significant as it provides us with information as to how the yoginis originated from the eight *matrikas*.

The *Kularnava Tantra* text also highlights the relationship of the ‘*Chausanth yoginis*’ with that of the Bhairavas. The Bhairavas, also mentioned to be sixty-four in number, depict *Vira*, i.e., *Siva*. It is mentioned that the 64 yoginis married the 64 bhairavas, who emanated from the eight Bhairavas of the Mahakal Bhairava, signifying the union of Sakti and Siva. Furthermore, the *Agama* text mentions that these Bhairavas were the consorts of the yoginis. The cult of sixty-four yoginis attends even the Lord Jagannath of Orissa. The *Kularnava Tantra* text elaborates that worship of the union of these sixty-four couples must be met with flowers, flesh, *Akshata*, and eatables and drinks of six flavors. It also states that in the absence of flesh, ginger or garlic must be offered. The worship of yoginis also includes certain pleasure-seeking actions among the initiates of the *chakra*. When disciples in Kaula tantra perform the yogini worship sitting in *chakras*, the last phase of the worship involves *maithuna* or intercourse. The *Kularnavatantra* mentions that by performing the prescribed form of worship the *Sadhaka* is liberated from the cycle of re-births by the yoginis and it also leads to the Pacification of diseases, aversion to calamities, and difficult situations.



Another text with significant information on the yoginis is the *Mattotra Tantra*. The text itself is revealed to be of the Kaula Tantra school and elaborates on the four *chakras* – *khechari* and *yogini cakra* which represents sixty-four Yoginis, along with the *Mula cakra* depicting the group of 81 yoginis, and *Malini cakra* which consists of 51 Goddess. While the Kaula school of tantra in their text describes the origin of 64 yoginis, there is however no information on how these distinctions in number came by or how these different groupings of yogini originated. However, in *Srimattotrat Tantra*, the worship of the ‘eksithi yogini’ or 81 yoginis is mentioned to be specially intended for royalty. Such chakras of eighty-one yoginis are found in the Temple at Bheraghat.

While prescribing the way to worship the yoginis, the *Kularnava tantra*, also However, in shlok, forty of the text, warns that if the worshipper of Samaychakra (that is the worshipper of Samaymata) communicates the Kula Gyana to a non-initiated person then both the Guru i.e.giver of the information and the Sishya i.e. recipient of the information are destroyed by the Yoginis and are converted into *pashu*. Furthermore, texts like Kalhan’s *Rajtarangini* as well as Somnath’s *Kathasaritasagra* also elaborate upon the miraculous powers of the Yoginis. The story of the Sandhimati and his guru Ishana in *Rajtarangini* describes how the dead Sandhimati’s skeleton was brought to life by the Yoginis. The narrative describes how grief-stricken Ishana, who was standing at his window witnessed an entourage of Yoginis carrying his disciple’s skeleton and repairing it sitting in a *Chakra*. The text elucidates that the yoginis made it appear as if Sandhimati had just woken up from sleep and not only this, they assured him that through their blessings, he would go on to become the king under the name *Aryaraja*. In another instance, the story of Sukhasaya in *Kathasaritasagra* describes how she teaches her friend Bandhudutta a magical spell and gives a magic string from which she is able to convert her lover into a monkey. The role of thread in converting people into *pashu* in these folklores or narratives is a way to assimilate the cult of yogini into the larger realm of Hinduism as the thread has been suggested to have an auspicious role in many Hindu rites.

The assimilation of the cult of Yoginis in the larger realm of Hinduism is done through the incorporation of the *Grama devatas* and *kula devi*. In this process, Tantricism acted as a link to justify their assimilation and elevate their position to that of a goddess. The different sculptural representations of yoginis in the open-roofed temples representing chakras and divisions known as *aras* tell us about the evolution of the yogini cult and how it got assimilated into Hinduism. The sculptures range from beautiful depictions of jeweled female bodies with well-rounded breasts and slim waists to scary looking with non-human or animal faces or at times no face at all. Many on the other hand have been damaged so that their identity remains unknown. The representation of yoginis as animals is a concept of Theriomorphism and those



present with the animal face and the human body represent the concept of Therianthropism. This concept can be associated with the process of assimilation of tribal deities worshipped in a particular region, such as in the case of Chellamma Goddess – the deity of scorpions in Karnataka. Along with their representation, these sculptures of yoginis are often depicted mounted on a *vahana* – these are at times animal figures such as a Camel or Scorpion or a human head assumed to be that of a *Bhairva*.

The Yogini sculptures are found in temples of Odisha such as Hirapur, which is one of the earliest dated yet smallest temples related to the cult which came into public knowledge in 1953. Here, yogini sculptures are built of coarse sandstone blocks carved from grey chlorite which is very common in Orissa. However, none of these resemble *matrikas*. The *matrikas* or ‘mother goddess’ have their separate temples such as one in Mukhteshwar. The yoginis in Odisha have been first described by Alexandar Cunnigham in his report of the 1870s and later by Kedarnath Mahapatra in the 1930s. Furthermore, the Orissan manuscript *Candipurana* of the local deity *Sarla* refers to yoginis and their origin. It described how *Candi*, one of the *matrikas* produced from her own body sixty-four female soldiers who were fond of flesh, bone, blood, and marrow which they used to consume after killing demons. These yoginis were given mount by the gods enumerating the name of sixty-four yoginis. The *Kalika Purana* reflects a tradition in which the sixty-four yoginis were not the attendants of the goddess but their varying aspects were worshipped individually.

The Hirapur temple houses Yogini sculptures that are more therianthropic i.e. animal-faced such as the elephant-headed yogini with protruding belly standing on a *vahana*, debatable to be a donkey or a mouse. It has been suggested by scholars to be a version of ‘*Ganesani*’. At another niche, we have four armed yogini sculptures standing on a scorpion termed ‘*Abhaya*’. However, an association of this sculpture can be traced with the *Chellamma* scorpion deity of Karnataka, which was originally a tribal goddess. Most of the yogini sculptures have sensuously formed bodies and a variety of hairstyles. One of the feminine depictions of the yogini can be seen adjusting her anklet. In another horse-headed yogini, considerable sensuality and animation are represented. Along with the sixty-four yogini chakras, four Bhairava sculptures have been found. One of them is *Eka pada bhairava* and the other three are seated figures with *urdhva linga* or erect phallus. It is also to be noted that the yogini sculpture also inspired certain 19th-century paintings from Rajasthan where one yogini is depicted wearing a skull cap and the other is seen having a drink, probably blood.

The study of this complex blend of sculptures and iconography represented in Hirapur, Orissa along with the association established with the *Saptamatrikas* (eight matrikas) symbolizes a two-way process of



evolution of the yogini cult, where on one hand they are seen as originating from matrikas. On the other, the evolution of sculptures ranging from first being theriomorphic i.e., purely animal forms to Therioanthropic which are hybrid sculptures, and then showing features associated with the fertility cult underlines the process of acculturation and assimilation that is happening to accommodate the yogini cult within the larger realm of Hinduism.

This cult of yoginis also has an association with other traditions such as Tantric Buddhism widely prevalent in regions like Nepal. The knowledge about tantric Buddhism is also esoteric. In *Tattvasamgraha*, Anandagarbha states that tantric knowledge is a 'secret' which should not be confided to every person. Tantric Buddhism provides an outlet for women to attain Buddhahood, before that, the Mahayana Buddhist texts such as *Bodhisattvabhumi* mentioned that a female could attain enlightenment, however, denied the attainment of a state of Buddha or Buddhahood to women. However, with the coming of Tantric ideology and practice, women Buddhas were incorporated into the larger realm of Buddhism. There are various titles used for women in tantric Buddhism. The prominent among them are Yogini and *Dakini*. Yogini connotes a woman practitioner of yoga or magical art, one who possesses divine powers. *Dakini*, on the other hand, refers to a woman wandering in the sky, this description of Dakinis coincides with the description of yoginis in the *Kualrnavatantra* text which also describes yoginis of Tantric Hinduism as Sky-wanderers. According to *Shiva Purana*, the *Dakinis* are also one of the attendants of Durga. The Dakinis are considered to be the guardians of tantric knowledge in Buddhism and are described as women who dance in space or women who revel in the freedom of emptiness. Furthermore, The yogini tantras of Tantric Buddhism such as *Cakrasamvara*, *Hevajara*, and *Candamaharosana* describe in detail the role of women in tantra and the kind of relationship they share with their male counterparts.

The foremost female Buddha in tantric Buddhism is *Vajrayogini*, she is described in the *Chandramaharosana* as a blood-red goddess, often appearing alone, has loose black hair, and is jeweled with bone ornaments. A much closer analysis of the *Vajrayogini* image depicts some resemblance with the *Camunda* goddess of the *Saptamatrikas*, such as features like protruding breasts, a garland of skulls, and a lion carcass. The Nawar tantric Buddhism worships four yoginis namely- *Vijesvari*, *Vajrayogini*, *Khadayogini*, and *Vajaravarahi*. These are also accompanied at times by an entourage of yoginis related to the cult of *Mayoginis* in the Northern Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. It is believed that those women who made offerings to *Vijesvari* Yogini every day were given special powers by the goddess herself in their dreams. These women were then considered to be living goddesses and performed practices such as healing and curing people.



Mayoginis lived under the rulers of Nepal to keep their purity and power secure. The folklore states that one who does the sadhana of the four yoginis of Nawar Buddhism gets possessed by the Mayoginis. The *Cakrasamvara tantra* text of Tantric Buddhism while describing the worship of these goddesses elaborates on the indispensability of the tantric union in attaining enlightenment. This indispensability of the performance of sexual intercourse in the worship of Yoginis is also prevalent in the *Sahajiya* cult of Buddhism, which is similar to the performance of *maithuna* in the Yogini cult assimilated in Hinduism.

The description of the cult of yoginis in Hinduism and the interlinks it has with other traditions of the subcontinent such as in Nepal elaborates upon its expansion as a cult. It has also proved essential in understanding the demarcation that exists between a cult and a religion. It is also seminal in understanding the role that the process of acculturation has played in the incorporation of the Yogini cult in the religious sphere. It is to be understood that although the knowledge of the yoginis within the Hindu tradition remains esoteric, the assimilation of the cult in the religion has acted in favor of its preservation. Furthermore, The cult of yoginis while at one point showcasing a symbolic link between Tantricim and Hindu practices also questions the dichotomies that exist between the two. The paper thus has brought forth the history of a much less known and talked about form of devotion that exists in Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism but has faded from the mainstream history of traditions.

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