

## AN INTERESTING LEGEND OF JARAIMATA TEMPLE AT BARWASAGAR

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There is a very interesting unicellular temple (single garbhagrha) dedicated to Jaraimata in Barwasagar in Jhansi district. It was located in Madhya Pradesh before the bifurcation of the State. At present this temple is under the control of Archaeological Survey of India, Lucknow Circle. It is datable to the 8th-9th century belonging to the Pratihara period.

In the cella, the image of goddess Jaraimata is still there. Unfortunately both of her hands and legs are broken. (Fig. 1) However, the temple is named after her. The temple stands on a high plinth. But peculiarly the cella is on the lower level.

Now the question is : Who is this goddess Jarai ? Was she a kuladevata of some ruling dynasty or a Gramadevata of this town ? Or was she a demoness Jara ? If so then how and when was she being elevated to the position of mother goddess ?

The original name of Jarai should be Jara. The legend of Jara is given in the Mahabharata<sup>1</sup>. According to it Jara was a demoness appointed by Brahma to destroy evil demons. She had the power to assume different forms at her will. She lived on the raw flesh meat and blood on the crossroads. At the same time she was endowed with divine power. Therefore she was then known as Griha Devi "Goddess of the House". According to the *Mahabharata*, whoever worshipped her in their house by representing her youthful figure with her children would be blessed by her. In the worship various offerings, sweet smelling flowers, incense and eatables should be included. In return she would do good to them and their family.

From the Mahabharata, we understand that the Magadha King Jarasandha got the name only because of the demoness Jara. It says that Brihadratha was the King of Magadha. His two queens gave birth to two halves of a male child which was thrown away by the maid servants outside the palace near a crossroad (Catuspatha) at Rajagrha (modern name Rajgir), the then capital of Magadha. The demoness Jara who belonged to Rajagriha and its surroundings happened to come by that path, took pity on the two halves even though she was very much used to feed on children. She restored the child by joining together and wished to give it personally to its parents. Assuming a beautiful female form approached Brihadratha and his queens and handed it over to them who had come outside their palace on hearing the cries of the revived child. When Brhadratha saw a divine damsel standing in front of him with the child, he asked her who she

was ? Jara by mentioning her maiden name told everything about her to the King.<sup>2</sup> When the King saw the two halves of the child were given a proper shape by Jara, he recognized her divine power and to show his gratitude to her, the child was named after her as Jarasandha. Sandha means two halves of a child was being joined together.

The King Jarasandha was so powerful that all the Kings remained obedient to him. Alas, he was killed by Bhima, one of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata* war in Kurukshetra.

The above legend brings to our notice two interesting factors. Firstly though Jara was a demoness yet she had divine power. So she was accepted as a *grhadevata*. She was worshipped by the people of Rajagriha including the King of Magadha himself. Secondly and most importantly there might have been a “crossroads cult” prevailing then and she may be regarded as special protectress of her worshippers even though she lived on flesh and blood. Here crossroad does not mean the crossing of two city streets. It may mean to be on a highway outside the town.

Regarding the shrine dedicated to Jaraimata in Barwasagar, it is possible that the cult immigration could have happened with the settlement of the community from Magadha to Madhya Pradesh. In the modern times this shrine is popularly named as Jaraimata.

The beautiful and very significant depiction of the figures of Navagrahas, trinity of gods, *astadikpalas* and the figure of four armed Narayana with attributes in his hands sitting in the centre of the lintel of the main door attract us very much. More than that the depiction of a pair of Varahi figures facing each other and shown holding a lotus in their right hand and kept near the chest indicates that Jaraimata must have been a very powerful deity being worshipped during this period. The whole panel is so meticulously carved that if we probe deep into these figures one may certainly come to understand the significance of it.

The detailed description of the beautiful lintel of the entrance of the Jaraimata temple is given below. It is carved with five rows of deities and semi divine figures. In the centre of the first row in a niche a figure of a seated goddess is shown. To her right the figures of Navagraha and to the left the figures of Dasavatara are depicted. The second row is carved with six goddesses in separate niches which include the figures of Laksmi and Sarasvati. In the third row the central niche is occupied by the four-armed Vishnu seated on Garuda who is shown raising his head up and looking at Vishnu. The upper two hands of Vishnu hold *sankha* and *chakra* and the lower two hands are kept on the knees. To his right Brahma is seated in *lalitasana* on his *vahana* swan and shown touching it with his right leg. On the left of Vishnu, the figure of Siva is seated in *lalitasana* and his right leg is shown resting on Nandi. In the fourth row very beautiful pair of Varahi is seated on a lotus and their right hands are shown holding lotus and kept near the chest. To their right and left four *dikpalas* are shown seated on their respective *vahanas*. Surprisingly at the bottom of figures of Varahi, a figure of a lotus is shown upside down



It means "I am Raksasi Jara by name and can assume different shapes at my will. I live happily in your house and I am worshipped there. I was created of yore by Svayambhu and my name is Grhadevi ; I was established with a divine shape for the destruction of the demons. Whoever draws my youthful figure with my children on the walls of his house, plenty reigns there ; he who does not do so scarcity afflicts him. My figure accompanied by those of my many children is painted on the walls of your palace and is well worshipped with various offerings (upacaras) such as sweet smelling flowers, incense and eatables. I am always mindful of doing good to you in return."

Fig. 1 Jaraimata in the cella (courtesy) American Institute of Indian Studies A 6-1

Fig. 2 Lintel of the entrance of the main door (courtesy) AIIS. A4-75

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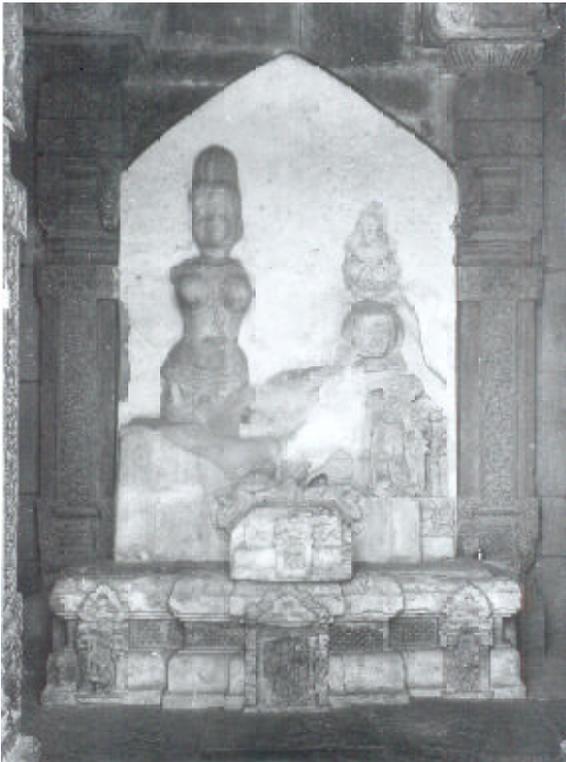


Fig. 1

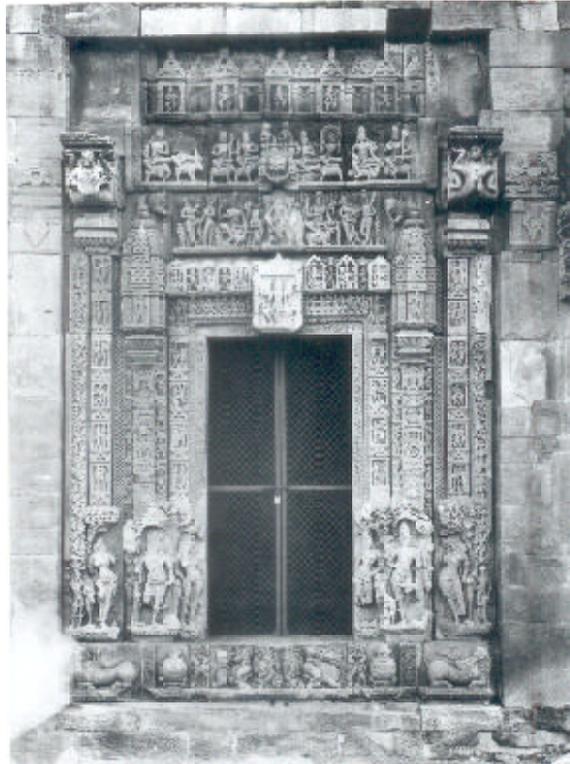


Fig. 2