



## Goddess Majhi Ghariani of Rayagada

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Of the many places where history and myth embrace in love Rayagada in Koraput district is one. This small township nestles in the arms of green mountains. River Nagabali kisses her hem and plays about in a half circle. The J.K.Pur Paper Mill ten kilometers away and the Jeypore Sugar Factory in her courtyard keep her still nights throbbing with life. The wind from Parvatipuram forty kilometers to the south blows past her doors leaving behind the very strong scent of Andhrite culture. Rayagada appeared as far back as the reign of King Samudragupta who tried to claim her. The scars of these battles are still there at today's Champikota, a thirty minutes' ride from the town. Such is her ancient lore. Such is her modern tale.

Goddess Majhighariani (Also known as Majji Gouri) is evidently the prime deity here. She commands the soulful devotion of the entire

population. The origin of the Goddess is associated with a historical event dating back to the fourth century A.D. The Orissa Gazetteer says, Samudragupta invaded Mahakantara, the modern Koraput and Kalahandi tracts. King Vyaghraraj of Mahakantar braved the battle with success. People today believe that he did it with the grace of the Goddess. The Goddess continued to be worshipped since then as a form of Shakti, energy incarnate. Shakti and the mother figure are synonymous in the mind of a Hindu. Therefore almost in no time the Goddess was accepted as the

universal mother. Mr. N.C.Padhi, a Teacher of G.C.D High School Rayagada has done copious research on the deity. He quotes the Orissa Gazetteer that " in the fourteenth century the Silavansi king Viswanath Dev chose Rayagada as his capital and shifted his headquarters to that new town. He built an enormous mud fort at



*Goddess Majhighariani, Rayagada*



Rayagada the ruins of which are still seen. Viswanath Dev also constructed rows of temples along the river Nagabali and the ruined temple called Majhi Ghariani is also attributed to the Goddess right in the middle of his palace and the temple was raised later at that very spot. Hence, the name Majhi Ghariani, or the one seated in the central room.

The construction of the temple (The structure as we see today) is of very recent origin, say, about forty years. At that time the railways were building a bridge over the Nagabali at a stone's throw from the shrine because at this point the river is a deep and narrow gorge going down around a hundred and odd feet. To the surprise of the builders, the massive piers gave way as many as three times. And then the head Pujari one night had a dream in which the deity commanded that her temple be built first. It was raised forthwith. Legend goes that the bridge too could be completed afterwards with no further difficulty.

The temple is situated at one end of the town. River Nagabali flows close by. The green hills around repose in peace. Among knee-high shrubbery, an occasional knot of large trees and a lean throng of thatched cottages, the temple complex stands imposingly. The room for head-shaving, the rest-house for incoming devotees with provision for cooking their meals and the water tap are spread closely over a small area. There is the Satikunda too where in 1571 A.D. when Viswanath Dev died, his hundred and odd queens immolated themselves following the custom of SATI.

From the main road towards Parvatipuram the approach way crosses the railway tracks to the temple steps along a gentle slope for a few yards. The main temple and the entrance hall stand on a rectangular marble-

floored platform. The booking counter and the entrance to the sanctum sanctorum are on two adjacent sides of the hall. The other two sides are open and grilled to let in enough air and light. The inner shrine is fitted with marble stones on walls and glass panels above that reflect the deity's burning image clearly.

The idol is a piece of lengthy stone dug deep into the earth. The small upper part is visible and it is pasted thick with red vermilion powder. Facial contours are marked in black and gold colours. The red face radiates fear. The eyes are round with large brows. The nose dazzles in an ornament that rests lovingly on the upper lip. The tongue made of a thin curved plate, sticks out. Light green leaves are littered before the image. Behind her are a few swords wrapped in coloured pieces of cloth. The Goddess is invoked into these swords during holy festivals. They are taken outside the temple precincts to represent the original idol that cannot be moved. The swords are worshipped when epidemics break out of any such calamity befalls the locality.

Each Sunday and Wednesday, devotees pour into this town with offerings of live goats and of cocks to propitiate the Goddess. These are people who had made a vow to sacrifice a live goat or cock if their prayer was granted. The overwhelming number of the temple-ward traffic if proof that the deity responds, and responds unflinchingly.

There is an interesting custom in connection with the animal sacrifice. The sacrificial bird (say, a cock) is brought right before the image and the Pujari in deep red robes throws a few grains of rice before it. The devotee awaits the cock to peck at the grains. With bated breath. If the cock does not, the Pujari cannot offer it to the Goddess and it is believed that the cock won't



touch the grains if the devotee has not performed a vow made before.

These days there is brisk business for coconut and banana vendors. The temple is packed every inch. The pilgrims purchase tickets for shaving or for offering a goat or cock etc. The notice-board in the entrance hall tells you the rate. They stand in a long row while home-guards keep an eye on discipline. The rituals in the shrine being over, they come out with the animal or bird to the open ground where paid butchers are waiting to kill the bird or animal and to make a few bucks. The fatal stroke falls. The headless body dances a while in death-throe and then dies. The pilgrims pick up the Prasad and leave for home. Many also stay back for the day. They cook their meals in the premises itself and wait for the homeward train. And out there, the open ground is layered many times with fur and feather. The air catches a strong scent of spiced meat. People, old and young, keep shouting. The bustle, beginning from the small hours of the morning, goes on till late at night.

Killing is a sin. But who won't risk it once at least for just this moment's euphoric surrender to the Almighty?

The CHAITRA festival is the most important of the festivals held every year with much pomp and ceremony in honour of Goddess Majhi Ghariani. The centre portion of the entrance hall is enclosed and holy fire is lit to the recitation of MANTRAS. The deity is installed in sacred pots (GHATA) and people carrying the pots go in procession. The streets too celebrate the function during and after the conclusion of the festival in the temple. The temple area during this function is decorated with flags, festoons and pyrotechnics. Fascinating feats of acrobatics enthrall the spectator on the last night. At sundown

people stream into the area. The cool night, the flurry of lights, those half-lit human faces so lost under a spell and the air of pious anxiety give the whole atmosphere a magical charm. At about 10 P.M the sacred pots will have made the last round and they reach this side of the railway track. The head Pujari carries the deity, comes dancing to the heavy beat of drums and cymbals. His steps grow faster ..... and then a leap and he is swinging effortlessly on a wooden plank nailed on the surface with iron spikes the pointed ends showing up. The trance look on his face speaks clearly that he has sat on a bunch of flowers, not a bed of blood-hungry thorns.

There is still another surprise. The fire-walking feat. The bed of fire is prepared in advance and the glowing cinders are spread over about fifteen square feet. Again the mass of on-lookers await expectantly the scene of this ritual. A small chick is dropped on the fire-bed. And it runs right on it. The head Pujari steps down the swing and again dances round the fire a couple of times. As the beating of drums rises in crescendo, he sweeps into the fire and out. Who can then check the frenzied tide of devotees? They rush and jump into the fire and run ..... Townsfolk, tribal, young men, old women, destitute and drunkards all and each. As if the burning bed beckons us beggars of God's mercy. It is a moment's total surrender distilled from an eternity's fragmented awaiting.

A board of trustees is entrusted with the temple's managements. The Tahsildar is the Managing Trustee and some persons of eminence of the locality are the member trustees. They have been doing their best to utilize temple funds so that a larger number of pilgrims are attracted.

*Courtesy: Orissa Review, October 1989.*