



Lajja Gauri : The Nude Goddess or Shameless Woman - Orissan Examples

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Striking images of a certain goddess having variously referred to as 'the shy woman', 'the shameless woman', 'the nude squatting goddess', 'the mother goddess' or because her historical name remains unknown, by numerous names, among them Sakambari, Prithvi, Aditi, Lajja Gauri, Renuka, Kottavi, Nagva Kabamdha etc. Usually one finds them lying in birth position, the spread-out legs drawn up laterally and bent at the knees, the soles of the feet turned upward, the arms bent upwards and the hands, each holding a lotus bud.. touch upon the petals of the large and open lotus blossom that crowns the image, as its neck and head.

India presents the unusual phenomenon of a traditional society that has produced religious art continuously from at least the third millennium B.C. to the present, within supposed canonical prescriptions, but actually with a great range of variation of forms. There are a great variety of mythological hybrids that are fixed features of the vocabulary of Indian art. Among them are found primordial and powerful symbols whose origins within the culture cannot be traced, yet whose omniscience within the art and culture indicate their usefulness within it. Lajja Gauri, in artistic and conceptual ancestry, descends from a group of ancient popular symbols, among others, the lotus and the purna kumbha, or brimming pot. Conceptually Lajja Gauri has antecedents, which

may be, and in fact have been, traced back to the Indus or the Chalcolithic culture of India.

On the human level, the image of Lajja Gauri acts as a temporal reference point, that is, the female giving birth, an auspicious occurrence: she is the embodiment of the idea of fertility. On the divine level, Lajja Gauri is the embodiment of the idea of fertility, of generation, of life- force. On the cosmic level, the image suggests universal laws and processes of generation of life.

Lajja Gauri is almost always made to lie on her back, supine. The toes of the recumbent figure tensely splayed as if she is in the act of giving birth, yet there is no indication of pregnancy. Some say that the goddess is simply indecent, shameless, and the pose indicated sexual receptiveness although certainly, the pose is sexually suggestive. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, although some do give birth miraculously, Indian goddesses are never pregnant in imagery or myth. The pose of Lajja Gauri is ambiguous, but probably intentionally so since the pose of sexual receptivity and the pose of giving birth are the same. The human form and the intercourse/ birth pose are used as a metaphor for creation. In turn human parturition is used in this image as a metaphor for divine creation. We have seen women who do not get children for along time worship Lajja Gauri. Butter and red lead are applied on the vagina and breasts and they pray for children.



Figures of the goddess Lajja Gauri range in size from two inches to over life-size and are made either through time and region from the minimal and nearly aniconic to the fully human. Truly these figures appear at the beginning of Christian era. In most of the Lajja Gauris, the vagina is prominently depicted as if the figure is about to give birth. In many cases these female figures are shown without the head. We do not know the exact reason behind this widespread motif. One of the suggestions is that, because of her nudity, the goddess felt ashamed, and hence the face was not shown. Whatever it may be this picture became very popular, because probably it satisfied the human aspiration for children. Hence it is not only represented and worshipped today in many parts of India but it is found depicted in churches and monuments as far as South East Asia.

We have got two Lajja Gauri plaques measuring 10 to 12 cm, carved on limestone from the Nuapada district of Orissa. On stylistic ground, it may be assigned to the 8th century A.D. It is carved on squatting position without stretched legs, the common posture of female during childbirth. Pendant breast, navel and vulva etc. are conspicuous features of its blooming youth and also a pointer to the fertility cult. The most outstanding features of the deities are that they are headless. Instead of the head, lotus leaves with stem are delineated on the neck, as if it is efflowering from it. Some lotus leaves along with elongated stems are also discerned on the right side of the shoulder, as if they emerge from the neck and bend to the right. Thus, the upper part of the figurine adorned with vegetation, unfolds a vegetative and fecundity aspects of its nature.

Interestingly similar representation is also found among the Bhiyans, a hunting gathering and shifting cultivator community of Orissa. Indeed, we do not know whether the tribals are the imitators, or have continued the tradition of their

distant forefathers, the chalcolithic people who are believed to have been the early inhabitants of India. Another example comes from the Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh. Here outstretched leg posture of a female is found carved in Gotul or youth dormitory of Muria tribe. The outstretched leg posture of semi squatting position of the motif, thus conveys the sense of kama (sexuality). At the same time, sexuality correlates with fertility ritual or vice versa. Belief in the relation of sex and vegetative-fertility is fathomed by many tribal communities of Eastern India.

We have a Harappan seal, in which a woman is shown with her legs stretched wide apart and a plant issuing from her vagina. This indeed is a symbol of fertility. For centuries this continued to hold the Indian mind, as examples from historical period testify.

The village goddess of fertility, embodies, very often the composite features of sex and fertility. As such, numerous female deities of fertility-nature either in anthropomorphic shape or in aniconic features are commonly found in peasant India. The fact reveals thus the highest regard accorded to the woman folk, who coalesced in her person sexuality and fertility, like copulation, conception and birth. The idea traversed to the Art Tradition of India where erotic art found fused with fertility. The artist who carved Lajja Gauri images were aware of the more simply erotic images, but they distinguished her image through incorporation of rich symbolism.

Meanwhile, the image of Lajja Gauri still remains enigmatic. It is obvious that there still remain quite a few questions regarding the identification, status, affiliation and disappearance of the intriguing Lajja Gauri to be answered.

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