

HEADLESS GODDESS OF NUAPADA–ORISSA

(A STUDY OF ITS ANTIQUITY AND IDENTITY)

Dr. Baba Mishra

The present paper deals with the Headless Goddess, discovered recently in the Nuapada district of Orissa State. (Eastern-India). Prior to this, there have been well-documented researches on the intriguing Headless Goddess or often-called Lajja-Gauri, hitherto reported from Western India, Southern and Central India. The present finding of Headless Goddess carved on a limestone plaque, is first of its kind in Eastern India.

Nuapada region lies in 82.32 E. and 20.49 N. Latitude of Orissa State¹ (Eastern India). The land is clad with lofty mountains and valley. However, it now witnesses drought and famine in view of scanty rainfall. There is, evidence of a continuum of Civilization and Culture in Nuapada from the early time up to the early medieval period. The territory formed eastern part of South-Kosala in the ancient and the medieval history of India². There developed an urban culture in Maraguda valley of Nuapada at least towards the early Christian period. Maraguda served as the capital of the Saravapuriya dynasty³ (6th-7th Cent. A. D.). The Chinese pilgrim Hieun -Tsang visited the capital during the 7th Cent. A.D. and has left a graphic account of it⁴. The land, moreover, boasted of a strong tradition of mother Goddess worship. Mahisamardini Durga icon, Sakti Peetha, Durga temple with goddess in Situ and Yoni stone⁵ etc. are some of the Sakta-Tantric relics unearthed in Nuapada region.

Further finding of the Bhudevi icon, modeled in a crossed legged posture, in Maraguda Valley, is not only unique but also substantiate the tradition of Mother Goddess worship in the concerned land. There is the representation of a tree on the head of Bhudevi, thereby providing the clue that, it is the deity of vegetative fertility⁶. Among the other relics, pertaining to the worship of Mother Goddess and deity of vegetative fertility in Nuapada land, however, there are two such Headless Goddesses carved on limestone plaque, very often designated as Lajja-Gauri, which offers a fascinating challenge to the connoisseurs of Art and Indologist.

FIND SPOT—Recently, two limestone plaques have been unearthed in Nuapada district. Plaque No. I is arrested while excavating the plinth area of Komna Panchayat College building of Nuapada, while plaque No. II was discovered by Mr. J. P. Singh Deo from the Kotipadar village, which is about 10 kms. from Khariar Subdivision of Nuapada.

While the former plaque is in possession of Komna Panchayat College authority the latter is preserved in the personal Museum of Mr. Singh Deo.

ICONOGRAPHY OF THE GODDESSES

Plaque No. I—Headless Goddess is carved on a limestone plaque measuring 10 CM. X 11 CM. On stylistic ground, it can be assigned to the 8th Cent. A.D. The motif, however, is considerably injured. The deity is nude and headless. It is carved in squatting position with outstretched legs, the common posture of female during childbirth. While fashioning the figurine, attempt is made to show anatomical details. Pendent breast, navel and vulva etc. are indicative of its blooming youth and also a pointer to the fertility aspect. Legs are shaped in outstretched posture as far as possible to expose the vulva region. Even the right foot is placed on a raised platform to meet this objective. There is a design, which seems to be a wrinkling of skin or fold of garment on either thigh of the motif. While the navel is faintly visible, the abdomen of the deity is partially chopped off. Below the navel, the folding of skin is discerned which betokens a sense of woman-hood. The vulva region is carefully carved. Probably the artist had shown the clitoris, which is, however, illegible at present. The motif, as cited already, is carved in a squatting position, within a shallow pedestal. But sufficient care was taken to exhibit its genital prominently. The motif is two handed. Both the arms are, however, broken. The most striking aspect of the deity is that it is headless. Instead of the head, lotus leaves with stems are delineated on the neck, as if it is flowering from it. The neck portion of the image is obliterated. 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, upper part of the figurine adorned with vegetation, unfolds a vegetative and fecundity aspects of the figurine (Figure 1). Natural and unornamented, the figurine does, not only reveals its fertility and vegetative feature but also demonstrates a stark sexuality about it.

Plaque No. II—Headless Goddess measures 11 CM. X 12 CM. This motif is also carved in squatting position on a pedestal. Unlike its counterpart (plaque No. I), it is characterised by a round and polish body. Plaque No. II, Headless Goddess, therefore, may be ascribed to the later part of the 8th or 9th Cent. A.D. The figurine, moreover, wears a cloth (typical of jama), which covers the lower part of the body up to the ankle and loiters on the pedestal. Fold of garment is marked on either thighs or ankles. The feet are shaped flat along with the fingers. The navel is prominently shown. Winkles of skin on either side just below the breast is carefully fashioned to give an aesthetic sense to the motif. Bulbous bosom and heavy hips of the motif indicate its fertility aspect. Unlike plaque No. I, Headless Goddess, the lower part of the body of this motif is wrapped with garment (jama). The motif, moreover, is two handed which are shaped in up-right posture. In its right hand, she holds a lotus-bud having an elongated stem, while the object upheld in left hand is completely mutilated. Annulate design, indicating armlet

is carved on either arm or elbow of the goddess. There is a punching mark around the neck of the deity, which seems to represent the necklace. It is also a Goddess without an anthropomorphic head. As a substitute of head, a full-blown lotus is exhibited on the shoulder, in the shape of efflorescence from the neck. Fluted petals of the lotus are meticulously carved. The goddess may be thus called "Lotus Headed" and it too reveals the same vegetative and fertility aspect of the Deity (Fig. II).

Indeed, plaque No. II, Headless Goddess is a beautiful workmanship of the artist. Composition of the different parts of the figurine is cohesive and well integrated. It is ornamented, which show the taste of medieval finery of Orissa.

Two figurines of Headless Goddesses of Nuapada, Orissa, however, demonstrate the artist's mastery on form and conception. The posture of the motifs appears natural. Their body movement is vivacious and elastic. The composition is coherent and it produces a felling of indivisible wholeness of unity, where the artist, art form, and art object remain within an inseparable bond.

Both the motifs, however, are associated with vegetative fertility and sex, but deviation is also, marked in the delineation of these figurines. Whereas plaque No. I, Headless Goddess is fashioned in stark nudity with prominent vulva, which is the common feature of Headless Goddess or Lajja-Gauri, plaque No. II, headless deity is different in this respect. In later case, garment is provided to cover the vulva region. Sexuality and fertility aspect is only marked from the outstretched leg posture, heavy hips and open bosom of the Goddess. To show its vegetative trait Lotus flower/ Medallion is delineated on its neck. Whereas, in former plaque No. I instead of lotus flower, lotus petals are seen to issues out of its neck. This particular trait is rarely found in the iconography of Lajja-Gauri discovered until now from other parts of India.

ANTIQUITY AND IDENTITY OF THE GODDESSES

Fertility Goddesses were widely popular in the ancient world. This reveals the veneration of maternity as a divine principle. Usually, such fertility goddesses were modeled as headless. The primary emphasis was given in fashioning the breast, navel and the vulva regions⁷.

In Indian perspective, however, Headless Goddess does not occupy an exalted position among the pantheon of Hindu deities⁸. There is also no standardized iconographic text on this subject matter. Consequently, confusion arises in the sphere of satisfactory identification of the Goddess. Also, no all-inclusive explanation has yet been made pertaining to the origin and development of Headless Goddess in India. Hitherto, Indologists have been identified the said image as "Aditi Uttanapada⁹", "Lajja-Gauri" or Shameless woman¹⁰. Hosts of scholar of both East and West have accepted the

denomination—Lajja-Gauri, ascribed to this headless deity. Still identification from other angle has been postulated. In view of the exhibition of the vulva region, she has been categorized as, personified Yoni type of fertility figurine¹¹. The sporting of vegetation from the throat impel Scholars to identify her as; Sakambari¹². Marshall¹³, however, has identified the lotus head figure as, Prithivi, while others saw an affinity with the nude folk Goddess, Kotavi¹⁴, and with, Mahanagni¹⁵, Hunter further coined the nomenclature 'Nagnakavandh', for the Headless goddess¹⁶. Scholars have also advocated pre-historic origin of the figurine. Sankalia¹⁷ advanced indigenous Chalcolithic origin after the Inamgaon excavation. R. C. Dhere¹⁸ however went a step further in elucidating the folk tradition and textual evidences, to point out the origin and development of so-called Lajja-Gauri or Headless Goddess. Headless Goddess, therefore, still remains a riddle. Riddle becomes more acute with the discovery of more and more such icons from different parts of India. The recent finding of two Limestone plaques of Headless Goddess from Nuapada area of Orissa (Eastern India) however differs from each other in their treatment of details.

But the most common characteristics of these figurines as also discern in other examples, are Headlessness, outstretched leg postures (squatting position) and vegetative fertility or nourishment aspect. It, thus, seems to unfold some clue pertaining to the origin and development of the deity and thereby its identity.

Headlessness of divinity in Indian context is discerned at least since the proto-historic time as the case of fertility figurine recovered from Mohenjodaro¹⁹ and Inamgaon²⁰ shows. Later on, in Brahmanical tradition also, Headless contour of divinity was fathomed. In this sphere, the story of Renuka (Wife of sage Jamadagni) is an illustration. The icon of Renuka has been worshipped as Matangi Devi and Yallamma and Prithvi etc. for procuring offspring by barren women today²¹. Another glaring example in this sphere is Devi Chhirmamasta of Dasamahavidya²². The Dhyana (Hymn) of Chhirmamasta depicts her iconography, thus, that she is headless, having two hands. In the right hand she holds dragger/discs, whereas in left hand, she carries severed head. (Chhirmamasta tatha chhirna chhirna mundavadharini etc). She is attended by two Sakhis (attendant) on either side. Three streams of blood issues out from her chopped off throat and falls into the mouth of the Sakhis. She is also portrayed as Digamvari (nude) which shows her sexual aspect. This fact is also highlighted in her Dhyana²³ (Hymn). In view of the nourishing feature, she has been also praised as "Jagat vaandhya jagatpuujya jagata prana parayani" Chhirmamasta of Hindu version may be equated with Vajra Yogini of Buddhist tradition. Consequently, the Vajra Yogini motif of the Buddhist Art seems to be the replica of the former²⁴.

It seem that the various forms of mother goddesses (including the goddesses of Dasamahavidya) originally, belong to different folk culture and social sub-strata. But in between first century A.D. and ten century A.D. these goddesses were absorbed into the brahmanical religion and identified as a part of the universal mother goddess in Indian culture²⁵.

In Parvati legend, thus, her sexual aspect, nourishing feature and Headlessness contour is commonly meet with.

Analogous can be drawn in this respect from, 'Sri' and 'Laksmi' concept of Indian Art and literature. Sexual aspect of the earlier image of, 'Sri' is evinced in the 'personified Yoni type' figurine having squatting posture. Squatting posture, although is a prescribed position of woman during child birth as outlined in Charaka and Susruta Samhita²⁶, yet the said posture is also a prescribe posture of Kamasastriya Vandha²⁷ (coitus).

In fact, in Tribal culture of India, often outstretched leg posture of female is noticed. One such instance is a carving in Gotul or youth dormitory of the Muria tribe of Baster region of Madhya Pradesh²⁸ (Middle India). Youth dormitory of the tribals primarily rests on sexuality or sexual foreplay. The outstretched leg posture or semi-squatting position of the motif, thus, conveys the sense of Kama (Sexuality). At the same time sexuality correlates with fertility and fertility ritual²⁹ or *vice versa*. Belief in the relation of sex and vegetative fertility is fathomed among the tribal of Eastern India like the Oraons, the Santals and the Mundas³⁰.

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 the peasant India. It reveals certainly the highest regard accorded to the women folk, who coalesced in her person sexuality and fertility, like copulation, conception and birth. The idea traversed into the Art tradition of India, where erotic Arts are found fuse with fertility³¹. The cult of Goddess 'Sri', therefore, had direct bearing on sexuality and fertility (in our context nourishment feature).

Literary text like Sankhayana Grihasutra³² also brings her profile as Goddess of sex and fertility. Srisukta of Rigveda further describes her as Arda. As such, she was reckoned as the guardian deity of the farmers³³. She thus embodies in herself vegetative fertility or nourishing aspect. Just before 1st century A.D., Goddess 'Sri' was assimilated with other Goddesses like Laksmi, Prthvi, Sasthi, Raka, Jaya and Sachi³⁴ etc. By this time the cult of 'Sri' or Laksmi was also discerned in Buddhist culture. In Buddhist Art, Goddess 'Sri' *alias* Laksmi was usually fashioned in between two husks, who pours water on her head to keep her 'Arda', was also a personified yoni type figurine. Such type of motifs has been retrieved from the Buddhist Art Centres like Sanchi, Bharhut, Kosambi and Budhgaya³⁵ etc.

Moreover, in the Jaiminiya Brahman, Goddess, 'Sri', identified with Laksmi has been equated with corn³⁶. Padma Purana and Visnudharmottara Purana also describe her as Lotus-headed³⁷. The lotus head aspect of Laksmi betokens her vegetative fertility character. At the same time, her headless contour, being devoid of anthropomorphized head is conspicuous. In this respect, Laksmi has been equated with Sakambari³⁸ as one covered with vegetation as a substitute of head.

Consequently, in the evolution of Durga-Parvati and Sri Lakshmi concept the cardinal traits like headlessness, amorous aspect and fertility/nourishment features are commonly met with. That in Brahmanical culture, although Durga-Parvati and Sri Lakshmi appear distinct, yet very often, they are considered as one³⁹.

It seems that Durga-Parvati and Sri Lakshmi had their common source of origin. In this sphere, the fertility deity of Mohenjodaro and the Inamgaon headless clay figurine may be reiterated as being the forerunner of Durga-Parvati *alias* Sri Lakshmi. It is heartening to note further that the so-called Lajja-Gauri or headless Goddesses combines these common characteristics of Durga-Parvati *alias* Sri Lakshmi. Covertly, sometime the artist; therefore, to exemplify the Durga Lakshmi traits in the person of headless goddess do delineate the cardinal emblems of the Saiva-Sakta and Vaisnava creeds. Some of the examples may be furnished in this context—that the Lajja-Gauri plaque discovered from padri⁴⁰ (1st century A.D.) show Linga, Vrisava and Lion head by its side⁴¹. Damaged plaques of Lajja-Gauri from Ter (Ter Museum) show the goddess as armless and lotus-headed. In this plaque, the Bull faces the linga on the right edge and the devotee and the Lions face are carved on the left edge⁴². Similarly, the stone plaque of Lajja-Gauri excavated from Bhokandan (5th Cent. A. D.) and Majati (5th Cent. A. D.) exhibits conch (Vaisnavite emblem), the Linga, the Nandi and the Lions head⁴³ (Saiva-Sakta features). In another Lajja-Gauri plaque of Ter example, conch is noticed besides the other emblems⁴⁴.

However, the Saivite affinity of the goddess is very suggestive from the allusions of Bull, Nandi and Linga in different categories of Lajja-Gauri plaque. But doubt arises in case of lion's head. It has been interpreted as Kirttimukha, or vehicle of the goddess⁴⁵. But none of these interpretations appear satisfactory in view of the simple fact that in Narasimha Iconography (incarnation of Visnu), it is the head rather than the body that bears significance. The Lion head in some of the Lajja-Gauri image, therefore, most likely represents Narasimha-Visnu. Similarly, the conch is also an attribute of Vishnu, which can be further interpreted as symbol of water and thereby fertility, which also bears direct co-ordination with Lakshmi, the goddess of fertility.

In addition to, in some other examples, Lajja-Gauri icon has been noticed amidst Saptamatrikas⁴⁶ that further unfolds the fact that Lajja-Gauri also belongs to the family to which Saptamatrikas belong⁴⁷. Thus, the salient features of the above discussions are as follows :—

- (1) That the Mother Goddess worship was wellknown from the beginning of Indus civilization and culture as the Mohenjodaro fertility goddess and Inamgaon clay figurine testifies. At least, from the 1st Cent. A. D., numerous Mother Goddesses including Durga-Parvati and Sri Lakshmi etc. came to the forefront of the Brahmanical culture. Although these goddesses appear distinct at superficial level, yet all of them fuse together in one Universal Mother Goddess in reality.

- (2) Chhirnamasta and Sakambari, other manifestations of the great Mother Goddesses, moreover, combines themselves the cardinal traits of Lajja-Gauri or Headless deity like—headlessness, sexuality fertility and nourishing aspect.

HEADLESS GODDESS VERSES DEVI SAKAMBARI

In our present context, however, it is the Goddess Sakambari whose iconography and iconology seems to tally well with the headless goddess or so-called Lajja-Gauri.

According to Laksmi Tantra, the blue coloured Sakambari manifested from the body of Parvati during the fourteenth cycle of Vaivaswata Mannantra⁴⁸.

The Lotus head of the Goddess as already cited cognate the deity with Sri Laksmi. Sanskrit literatures moreover, reveal the connection of Sakambari with vegetative fertility. Sakambari is known to have lived a 'Thousand Divya' (Divine) years only on vegetables⁴⁹. In Sri-Chandi portion of the Markandeya Purana, it has been pointed out that the worship of Sakambari, soon bestows all kinds of inexhaustible store of food and drink⁵⁰. In Devi Mahatmya, moreover, Sakambari declares to provide to the whole World including the Gods with nourishing vegetables produced from her body until the shower of rain⁵¹. Consequently, Sakambari came to be worshipped in India at the time of drought and famine.

Sakambari Mahatmya, a section of Skanda Purana mentions the sacred place—Mahakuta as the original abode of Devi Sakambari⁵² Mahakuta region, identified with Badmi (Dist. Bijapur, Karnataka State) is full of archaeological ruins, where nude torso of female with all the characteristic attributes of so-called Lajja-Gauri is discovered. As such, nude torso seems to be the representation of Goddess Sakambari⁵³.

Two headless Goddesses, carved on the limestone plaques of Nuapada, therefore, appear to be no other than Sakambari. The worship of such goddess in Nuapada region of Eastern India divulges the necessity—the necessity to ward off drought and famine, for which Sakambari stands.

ARID CLIMATE IN NUAPADA (ORISSA, EASTERN INDIA) AND INVOCATION OF HEADLESS GODDESS—SAKAMBARI

Environment plays a vital role in shaping human society and culture. Efflorescence of civilization and culture in Nuapada-Khariar region of Western Orissa in Early History as revealed by archaeology, shows that the Ecosystem in the concerned land was very congenial. There was, however, a marked decline of the climatic condition in the present Nuapada district at least from the 8th Cent. A. D., causing thereby drought and famine. Change of Ecosystem may be one of the potential factor of the decline and disintegration of the Maraguda Urban Centre of Nuapada during the 8th-9th Cent. A.D. The hypothesis receives substantial support when we investigate the environmental condition of India during aforesaid ages.

India suffered from arid climate during the post-Gupta period⁵⁴, literary sources like Vamana Purana (7th Cent. A.D.) and Dasakumara-Charitam of Dandini (8th Cent. A.D.) graphically refer to the harrowing details of famine in different parts of India⁵⁵. Even the Javanese Chronicles (7th Cent. A.D.) and the account of Arab traveller like Sulaiman (9th Cent. A.D.) present the picture of drought in India⁵⁶. These Literary references certainly testify to scanty rainfall in India that resulted into drought and famine in many parts of the land. Consequently, urban centres like Champa, Vaisali, Pataliputra and Varanasi etc. were deserted and liquidated⁵⁷.

Nuapada region of Orissa (Eastern India) had shared this common background. Agriculture usually suffers in the event of poor monsoon. To meet the natural calamity, however, artificial water reservoirs were harboured by the then farming community. Faint traces of a Dam on Zonk river of Nuapada popularly known, as Lac-bridge seems to be constructed for irrigational purpose at that time to combat against drought. The mortar used to bind the stones of this bridge is reported to contain Dhup (Rasin), lac (Shellac) and Gud⁵⁸ (Molasses).

The foregoing discussions indicate that the environmental change wrought at least since 8th Cent. A.D. in Nuapada region, had certainly hit hard on the farming communities of the land. Under such predicament, besides creating artificial water reservoir, divine grace was also sought through the worship of goddess Sakambari (Headless deity). The present finding of two limestone plaques of Headless Goddess, could have been for the purpose of worship by the farmers of the concerned region in their respective home.

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21. M. K. Dhavalikar—*op. cit.*, 33, 34, 1979-80, Poona
22. As enumerated in Chandisaptasti section of Markandeya Purana, Devi Parvati *alias* Sati transformed herself into Ten Goddesses in order to frightening Siva. When the later refused her to attain the sacrifice of Daksaprajapati (Father of Parvati-Sati). These ten goddesses are known as Dasamahavidya such as Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhubaneswari, Bhairavi, Chhirmamasta, Dhumavati, Vagala, Matangi and Kamala etc. Tantrik texts further describe the circumstances of the emanation of Devi Chhirmamasta. According to Kubjika Tantra, Devi Parvati cut off her own head and nourished her attendants, Sankini and Dankini by the blood that issued out from her throat. Henceforth, Parvati came to be known as Chhirmamasta.
23. Kunti Kumudini Kulla
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24. Benoytosh Bhattacharya—*The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, P. 247-48, Calcutta, 1968
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33. D. Desai—*op. cit*, P. 18, 1975
34. J. Gonda—Aspect of Early Visnuism, P. 217, Delhi
35. *Ibid*
36. M. K. Dhavalikar—*op. cit*, P. 32, 1979-80
37. *Ibid*
38. Sakambari is also an epithet of Goddess Durga (W. J. Wilkins—Hindu Mythology, P. 306, 1900, London) so, at one time Durga was also conceived as vegetation Goddess.
39. That Durga and Laksmi although appears distinct yet they had common source of origin or the goddesses are the different manifestation of a single Universal Mother Goddess is appear from Mahabharata, which appends Durga Stotra (Mahabharata-IV, P. 6) at least since the later-Vedic period. Their close affinity however is discerned from the Gupta Coin, where the portrait of Laksmi is shown as seated on Lion, the vehicle of Goddess Durga (See A. S. Altekar catalogue of Gupta gold coins in the Bayana Hoard. P. 23).
40. V. Shinde—The Earliest temple of Lajja-Gauri.—The recent evidence from Padri in Gujarat—East and West, P. 481–485.
41. F. H. P. M. Janssen—*op. cit*, P. 464, Fig. 4, 1991
42. C. Radcliffe Bolon—Forms of the Goddess Lajja-Gauri in Indian Art, P-44-45, 1992. Also see F. H. P. M. Janssen—*op. cit*, P. 464, 191.
43. F. H. P. M. Janssen—*op. cit*, P. 464, 1991.
44. C. Radcliffe Bolon—*op. cit*, P. 45, 1992
45. *Ibid*
46. C. Radcliffe Bolon—A late 8th century Matrika set at Aihole, L. Chandra and J. Jain (Eds.) Dimensions of Indian Art, Vol. I, P. 51–56, 1968, Delhi.
47. The Divine Mothers (Matrikas) are generally Seven in numbers like—Brahmani, Mahesari, Kaumari, Vaisnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda. Sometimes, they are closely associated with Siva and are treated as the aspects of the Great Mother (See S. B. Dasgupta *op. cit*, P. 70-71, 1957)-F. N.-1.
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53. *Ibid*
54. *Ibid*
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56. *Ibid*, P. 113
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*P.-G. Department of History
Govt. Autonomous College
Bhawanipatna-76600
Dist. Kalahandi (Orissa)*