

## Yoginīs: Apotheoses of Nature

The study of the various sculptural representations of the female divinities known as Yoginīs gives the scholar of South Asian art and religion a window into the conceptualisations about divinity, femininity, and nature in India, especially in the 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yoginī sculptures represent a fascinating data set, with a few common themes running through them all, yet with details that vary enormously. In this paper, I will conjoin the examination of a wide range of images with information from textual sources to argue for this thesis: these images of the divine feminine are, first and foremost, *anthropomorphic representations of forces of nature* that are simultaneously *feared and honoured*; and that by aligning himself with these forces through propitiatory worship, the devotee taps into a wellspring of power which brings him enjoyments, supernatural powers, and ultimately spiritual liberation. As a secondary thesis, I wish to argue that these images show us that women are themselves thought of as one of the ‘forces of nature’ by the Indian male mind, and that therefore the representation of the Yoginīs is subtly reflective of the problematic stance towards women in ancient Indian society (i.e. both fear and honour; a stance which continues in some ways down to the present day). Due to the scarcity of secondary scholarship on the Yoginī temples, this paper will rely heavily on the single comprehensive study of them by Vidya Dehejia, entitled *Yoginī Cult and Temples: A Tantric Tradition*. The paper will derive its originality, then, both by its careful critique of that book, including a juxtaposition of its conclusions with other textual sources on

Tantrism, and by the comparative analysis of the original images, which it is to be hoped will raise a few new issues and interpretive possibilities.

The sculptural Yoginīs to which I refer are the images enshrined in the so-called Caunṣaṭh Yoginī temples, usually circular hypaethral temples of 64 divinities that are unique in Indian architecture. Before addressing these forms and their shrines specifically, we will begin (in Part I) with a discussion of the term ‘Yoginī’ and its various connotations. In *Yoginī Cult and Temples*, Vidya Dehejia discusses the different significations of the word ‘Yoginī’; my analysis will proceed in dialogue with hers, differing on crucial points. Subsequently in Part II, there will be a detailed analysis of a variety of images, especially from Hirapur and Bheraghat, including a comparison of these images with other images of the feminine. This will lead into the conclusion.

#### Part I: *What is a Yoginī?*

Dehejia presents a typology of ten kinds of Yoginīs, regarding each as different from the others, and all but the last as in some degree distinct from the Yoginīs represented in the temples we are considering. I would like to challenge that analysis here, arguing instead for the interrelatedness of nearly all these figures and their complex cultural and ideological connections to the Yoginīs of the temples. The first meaning she addresses is that of the yoginī as the human female adept in yoga, the noun being the feminine equivalent of the masculine *yogin*. (11)<sup>1</sup> ‘Yoga’ here stands for a vast complex of spiritual and psychosomatic disciplines, primarily intended to bring about the attainment of supernatural powers and/or spiritual beatitude, two aspects of the state of radical

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that all page numbers cited are from Dehejia unless otherwise noted.

freedom perennially viewed as the *summum bonum* of Indian religion. Dehejia argues that these are “not the Yoginīs of our Yoginī temples”, which is true, but glosses over the fact that there is an intimate relation between the two types. First, some yoginīs (as female adepts) would have performed their rituals with their yogi counterparts in the Yoginī temples themselves. Second, the rituals were seen to grant them powers which could turn them into virtual apotheoses of the very goddesses they worship.

This leads us to the second type, Yoginī as the partner in the Tāntric *cakrapūjā*, or transgressive sexual ritual performed in secret by men and women initiates into Tāntric sects. (13) These Yoginīs are also not to be confused with the Yoginīs of the temple, according to Dehejia. However, I would argue that it was the *śakticakra* itself (also known as the *Yoginīcakra*), the wheel of divine feminine powers of Tāntric theology, that formed the textual template for *both* the enactment of the *cakrapūjā* ritual and the plan of the Yoginī temples. The canonical texts of Vidyāpīṭha—or primarily goddess-centred Tantrism—commonly refer to the powers of this circle as Yoginīs, originally conceived as wild demi-goddesses following Bhairava in a supernal bloodhunt across the night sky. In the later sophisticated philosophical exegesis of Tantrism by figures such as Abhinavagupta, they were reinterpreted as being symbolic forms of the phases of the adept’s own consciousness, as well as being the powers which animate the senses and constitute the terms of the aesthetic experience which takes place in mystical ritual. (Sanderson 1988) In either case, these Yoginīs, which (Dehejia agrees) certainly *are* connected to the images in the temples, form the ideological template for the ritual which itself serves as the basis for the architectural form of the

temple. Furthermore, within the cakrapūjā, the female participants are to be regarded as embodiments of the devī, just as were the sculptural images which the male adept would see as the visual backdrop of the ritual circle. The process of regarding these human women as goddesses is made more challenging for the male adept by the fact they were frequently low-caste women. The *Cakra-Nirūpaṇam* specifies that desirable consorts (*dūtīs*) include a washerwoman, leather-worker, and prostitute. This may be further evidence of the tribal or at least marginalized origin of these practices. The Yoginī goddesses, as I hope to show, have a similar origin, thus creating another link in the complex web of associations between them and the Yoginīs of the cakrapūjā.

The third type of Yoginī is the sorceress and quasi-supernatural being (actually two types which Dehejia has conflated). The former is human, the latter part human or entirely supernatural. They are said to roam cemeteries at night, seeking corpses as sexual partners and feeding on human flesh. (Fig. 1) The confusion between the human sorceresses and the Yakṣinī-like supernatural beings seems to be due to the fact that the former, if she persists in her practices, may eventually become the latter. In figure 1, we see two of these supernatural yakṣinī/yoginīs in the cremation ground, one gnawing on bones cooked in a large cauldron, the other (also holding the ribcage remains of her repast) giving her blessing to a bowing figure, identifiable by his crown as a king! (Cf. Dehejia's "Kalacuri Monarch" article.) Both Yoginīs are fearsome (*aghora*), emaciated, with drooping breasts; nearly naked, they are clothed only in a leopard skin—traditionally a garb of the yogic ascetic as well. Interestingly, both carry swords. The landscape is wild and untamed, filled with various flora and fauna, indicating the intimate connection of the Yoginīs to nature: both being dangerous yet

powerful forces which can either create or destroy, depending on how they are approached. In the background stands a small shrine with a śivaliṅga, implying the relationship between the Yoginīs and Śiva, who is their lord and eternal consort. The crescent moon, sacred to Lord Śiva, hangs in a star-studded sky, completing this fascinating 18<sup>th</sup> century painting (currently in Vārānasī). Any group of this type of Yoginīs is also referred to as a *Yoginīcakra*<sup>2</sup> (as are our temples). Furthermore, in Bhavabhūti's drama *Malatīmādhava* a Yoginī of this type is referred to as observing the Kāpālīka vow, (15) explicitly linking these supernatural Yoginīs to the tāntric practices alluded to in the previous paragraph. Far from being “of a category apart” as Dehejia has it, I take these supernatural/sorceress Yoginīs to be one cultural source for the divinities which are elevated into the goddesses of the Yoginī temple. Figure 2 provides ample evidence of this. Pictured is an *aghora* Yoginī from the exterior of the Hirapur temple, who resembles the Yoginīs of figure 1 closely. She is emaciated, almost unclothed, with protruding ribs and tendons and drooping breasts. She wears a garland of skulls, and the front left hand holds a severed head, perhaps her meal, while the front right holds what was once a sword. The other two arms hold a tiger or leopard skin overhead, which she appears to be using as a parachute as she descends through the air (flight is a primary characteristic of the Yoginī as semidivine sorceress type). Her vehicle is an animal somewhat similar to those in the painting. In fact, the only difference between her and the cremation ground Yoginīs of the painting is that her hair is piled on her head in a coiffure instead of flying wild, and she is also ornamented with earrings. These marks of culture may be indicators of her elevation from legendary

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the story of Sandhimat in Kalhana's *Rājatarangini* and that of Padmāvatī in *Kathāsaritsāgara*.

semidivine tribal spirit to full divinity. It has always been in part through the process of cultural domestication that forces of nature are made auspicious in Indian religion.

The fourth type introduced by Dehejia are the Yoginīs of astrology, eight goddesses assimilated to the nine planets. (17) While I agree that they are entirely different from the Yoginīs of the temples, I do not agree that there is “no connection” (ibid.) between them. The astrological Yoginīs are representative of perceived forces of nature, which must be propitiated to protect one’s auspicious condition and forestall their potentially harmful influence. (As she points out, astrological texts contain “numerous prayers and rites to appease [them]”, ibid.) The Yoginīs of the temples also represent, as we shall see, forces of nature which must be honoured and propitiated, and are thus conceptually connected to these Yoginīs.

The fifth type are the Yoginīs of the inner cakras in the theology of Kuṇḍalinī-yoga. Each cakra, or energy vortex, thought to exist as a part of the subtle energy body within each human being, has a set of three deities associated with its particular nature and function, one of which is a Yoginī, said to be the *śakti* or power of that particular cakra. These Yoginīs, says Dehejia, “stand apart from the Yoginīs of the Yoginī temples.” (18) However, she neglects to mention that the tradition of kuṇḍalinī-yoga derives in the main from a tāntric sect known as the Paścimāmnāya transmission of Kaulism, more commonly known as the Kubjikā cult. This important sect, which flourished at the same time as the construction of the Yoginī temples and immediately after, was goddess-centred and practised the worship of the *Yoginī*- or *shakti-cakra*. (Dyczkowski, Sanderson) In fact, the goddess Kubjā, originally perhaps a local goddess elevated to identification with the highest divinity by the

sect, is listed as one of the 64 Yoginīs in the *Skanda Purāṇa* (7.116). Furthermore, several of the cakra-Yoginīs of the energy body are also identified as among the 64 Yoginīs in the list given by the *Kulārṇava-tantra* (e.g., Shākinī, Lākinī, and Hākinī). Even more significantly, Yoginī #64 in the Bheraghat circle itself is labelled as Ḍākinī, also one of the inner cakra-Yoginīs. Thus we cannot agree that the cakra-yoginīs are not connected to those of the temples.

We will move past the sixth type (the Yoginīs of the Śrīcakra of the Śrīvidyā sect, which I agree are largely unconnected with those of the temples), to the idea of the Yoginīs as aspects of Mahādevī. Dehejia argues that the assimilation of the Yoginīs to the Great Goddess was a late phenomenon (22-23), and I agree. However, rather than seeing a simplistic movement from early tribal or village goddesses to later wholesale assimilation to brāhmiṇism, I would argue for a more nuanced picture. Looking at the lists of names, both in texts and inscriptions, we see an interesting mix of non-Sanskritic local deities (their names slightly Sanskritised) and well-known Sanskritic goddess names (e.g., Eruḍi, Ahkhalā, Darḍḍurī; Indrānī, Īśvarī, Nandinī—from Bheraghat). Thus we gain a more realistic picture of Indian religion that draws more or less equally on both popular and elitist conceptions of divinity. Interestingly, the goddess who becomes most commonly identified as the central form of the Great Goddess, that is, Durgā Maḥiṣāsura-mardinī, is found in several Yoginī temples as just one of the 64 Yoginīs. Though her representation is generally slightly different (e.g., she is seen in a dynamic, active pose rather than seated as most Yoginīs), she is not demarcated in any special way which would imply that all the other Yoginīs are simply aspects of her. This is, however, clearly the vision of things by the time of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the so-called *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*

describes the 64 Yoginīs as emerging from the various parts of the being of the Great Goddess (e.g., her limbs, sweat, anger, etc.). A wonderful visual representation of this is seen in Figure 3, a 19<sup>th</sup> century drawing depicting the 64 Yoginī cakra literally emanating from the body of Mahādevī.

The eighth type of Yoginīs are attendant deities to Mahādevī. Here I agree with Dehejia that some of the extant representations of Yoginīs seem to be of this type, especially those at Lokhari. She proposes that the animal-headed Yoginīs, of which Lokhari has an abundance, are attendant deities that corresponds to Shiva's *gaṇas*, which are also sometimes depicted as having the heads of animals. (24) The *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* notes that when the Yoginīs wander on earth, they may assume the form of an ox, cat, goat, elephant, horse, and snake, among others. (ibid.) These forms are indeed depicted at several sites: there is a fascinating snake-headed Yoginī at Lokhari (Figure 4), in which an otherwise normal two-armed female body is topped by the raised hood of a cobra, flanked by three 'baby cobras' on each side. We also see horse-headed (Figure 5) and goat-headed (figure 6) Yoginīs there. I would argue that the Lokhari animal-headed Yoginīs are very revealing of the origin of Yoginī divinities more generally. In examining these images, we note that they are rather rough-hewn, with plain, entirely unornamented, and almost unfinished-looking backslabs. The Yoginīs are very full-breasted and full-hipped, two-armed, and simple in their decoration and ornamentation. All of this points towards a humble cultural origin for them, not of the elite but of the 'lower' strata of society, i.e. one less literate, less assimilated into 'Brāhmiṇism', and with links to tribal religions. The buxom physical characteristics echo those of so-called 'primitive' fertility goddesses, who are also usually depicted with two arms (such as those found at Harappā). The animal heads suggest that



these are *cthon*ic deities, nature deities, their composite forms graphically depicting the intimate relation of humans and their natural environment, especially those humans less fully absorbed into a ‘cultured’, urbane setting.<sup>3</sup> In the wider sphere of Hindu religion, goddesses are generally associated with nature and vice versa: most of the Sanskrit words for nature (e.g. *prakṛti*) are feminine, and Hindu religious systems that devalue the natural manifest world consistently also devalue goddess worship and femininity generally (e.g. Sāṅkhya/Yoga, classical Vedānta) and those that valorise the world also valorise the Goddess and other feminine principles (e.g. Tantra); or, perhaps, vice versa. Returning to the Lokhari Yoginīs, it is interesting to note their ambiguous representation mid-way between true attendant deities and the fully-blown divinities seen at the more elaborate Yoginī shrines. They are granted vehicles (*vāhanas*), something inconceivable for Shiva’s *gaṇas*, and they hold divine attributes, including what looks like a vajra and conch (Fig. 4), and display *mudrās* of blessing (Fig. 6). On the other hands, they have no attendants themselves, no *vidyādhara* type flying worshippers, and they lack the additional arms and elaborate ornamentation we have come to expect from full-blown divinities. Interestingly, though, several things link them to Tāntric and yogic practices. The rabbit-headed Yoginī of Figure 7 sits in a meditation posture, supported by a meditation belt, and others hold skull-cups for drinking prohibited substances in the left-handed (*vāmācāra*) Tāntric ritual. This constitutes another small piece of evidence in favour of the by now wide-spread theory that Tantra and yoga ultimately derive from non-Sanskritic indigenous, if not necessarily ‘popular’, sources. I am obliged to finish this section by admitting that the simplistic

---

<sup>3</sup> The fact that these representations possess great antiquity in terms of their content (and possibly form) is demonstrated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century stone panel at Mathura with five animal-headed mother goddesses cited on Dehejia

picture of animal-headed Yoginīs as being of a somewhat lower order is problematised by images such as the buffalo-headed Yoginī of Shahdol depicted in Figure 8. She is carved with fine and careful craftsmanship with smoothness of line and attention to detail (such as in her jewelry, the flowing lines of her garment, and the abstract flower motif in her halo). She is eight-armed, haloed and surrounded by a flock of attendant figures—some of them animal-headed themselves—her foot resting on a lotus pedestal. Thus this particular figure can hardly be qualified as an ‘attendant’ herself. Interestingly, she also has Tāntric attributes, including the *khaṭvāṅga* or skull-staff in one of her left hands, and a *mudrā* gesture made by the lower right.

The ninth type of ‘Yoginī’ listed by Dehejia is that of the *sapta-* or *aṣṭa-mātrkā*s. These figures have a representation that became standardised at some point, and therefore tends to be more or less identifiable. They are sometimes included within the Yoginīcakra of our Yoginī shrines, just as they are sometimes included in textual lists of the 64 Yoginīs, and sometimes not. Dehejia points out that there is a textual tradition, apparently beginning with Paurāṇic texts (e.g. *Agni Purāṇa*), of deriving the 64 Yoginīs from the eight *mātrkā*s. (28) This seems to be a later development, but one that was certainly firmly in place by the 11<sup>th</sup> century (as testified by stories in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*).

The final ‘type’ of yoginīs are the Yoginīs as the goddesses central to Tantric Kaula worship, liturgy, and philosophy. Dehejia triumphantly identifies these and these alone as the Yoginīs of the Yoginī temples. While I believe her conclusion is in the main correct, it is ill-defined. Firstly, what exactly is ‘Kaulism’? She does not offer us a concrete definition, thus rendering the central

identification not particularly useful or meaningful. She gives a definition of ‘Kula’ (from which, by secondary derivation, we get ‘Kaula’) from the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya*, itself a relatively late text, that equates ‘Kula’ with the state of mind in which the perceiver, process of perceiving, and object perceived collapse into a boundary-less holistic blissful unity. (32) This is a central philosophical concept of the Trika Kaula sect which flourished in 11<sup>th</sup> century Kāśmīr especially, and whose ideas are applied freely to nearly all later Tāntric sects. The real problem is that, by the time of texts such as the KJN mentioned above and the *Kulārṇava Tantra* (also cited by Dehejia), the term ‘Kaula’ had become what Paul Muller calls ‘a free-floating signifier’ that various Tāntric groups adopted to lend themselves legitimacy. In fact, as Alexis Sanderson has shown, Kaulism was an esoteric Shaiva sect that emphasised highly transgressive Goddess worship, and that apparently did not survive as an independent group, but whose ideas (after being subjected to esotericising exegesis) became highly influential. The true basic meaning of the Sanskrit word ‘Kula’ then, is ‘group/family’ or ‘body’, signifying simultaneously the centrality of a secret initiated ‘in-group’, the ‘families’ of the Yoginīs, and practices related to the body, ideas about the ‘divine body’, and the valorisation of the body generally (in contradistinction to classical mainstream Hindu tradition). She does correctly identify, however, the centrality of female spirit/goddess worship to Kaulism, especially in the form of the Yoginīcakra, visualised as a wheel of divine powers emanating from the central deity Bhairava.

Sanderson explains the role of the Yoginīs in the early Yoginīkaula cult as follows:

When the initiate passed [from conventional Shaivism] into this subjaent tradition he found that this masculine hierarchy was replaced by ranks of wild, blood-drinking, skull-decked Yoginīs. Radiating out from the heart of the Deity as an all-pervasive network of power, they re-populated this vertical order of the Shaiva cosmos, appropriated the cycle of time, and irradiated sacred space by sending forth emanations enshrined and worshipped in power-seats connected with cremation grounds... The

goal of the initiate was to force or entice these Yoginīs to gather before him and receive him into their band, sharing with him their miraculous powers and esoteric knowledge. (671)

Two kinds of Yoginī were central to Kaulism: the spirit/goddesses and the human women who participated in the rites and were sometimes believed to be possessed by, and thus identical with, the goddesses. Mark Dyczkowski writes:

...in all Kaula traditions in general, women are thought to have a special role to play as the transmitters of Kaula doctrine for, as the saying goes, “one should place wisdom in the mouth of a woman and take it again from her lips.” She is the master’s Tantric consort (*dūtī*) who, like the master, instructs the disciple and so is to be respected as his equal in every way....The secret of all the scripture, the supreme essence of the oral tradition, is on the lips of the Yoginī. Thus she is venerated as the Supreme Power which bestows the bliss of the innate nature of all things and is the embodiment of Bhairava’s will. The Yoginī is the womb from which the enlightened yogi is born...As the womb (*yonī*) of creation, it is the Lower Mouth which is the essence [and source] of Kaula doctrine. (63-64)

In later, ‘domesticated’ Kaulism, the Yoginīs are radically reinterpreted to symbolise constituents of the body (*kula*) of power within the adept, such as the deities of the senses to be gratified by the offerings of Tantric pūjā, and whose reward is the subtle states of transcendental mystical consciousness in which the adept becomes Bhairava himself. (Sanderson 680) While we do not have the space to go into this phase of Kaulism in detail, suffice it to say that this esotericising shift had taken place by the time of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, just before the probable peak of Tāntric worship within the Yoginī shrines.

Before moving on to a closer examination of the images, we will summarise the complex picture of the identity and nature of the Yoginīs that has emerged in the above pages. The Yoginīs were originally cthonic deities associated with nature, similar to the Yakṣinīs.<sup>4</sup> Combined with

---

<sup>4</sup> Dehejia notes that the Kulārṇava-tantra describes Yoginīs that reside in certain trees, as Yakṣinīs were said to do from very early on. (36) It also refers to the thousands of Yoginīs who live in the sky, on earth, in water, on mountains, and in forests. (34)

various local goddesses that attain prominence, the Mothers conceived as female counterparts to established male gods, as well as other goddesses primarily from Paurāṇic literature, the whole group is elevated to goddess status and connected to Lord Shiva as Bhairava, the Tāntric deity *par excellence* with a certain degree of brāhmiṇical legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> They are associated to varying degrees, as we have seen, with other supernatural and semidivine creatures called Yoginīs in an evolving cultural dialogic narrative with fluid categorical boundaries. They are finally interpreted as the circle of powers of Lord Shiva, who is not different from one's own consciousness, the realisation of which is one goal of the Tāntric worship probably practiced within the Yoginī shrines.

## Part II: *Specific Shrines and their Images*

The first Yoginī shrine I wish to discuss is at Hirapur in Orissa. This is a hypaethral circular shrine of 64 Yoginīs (the alleged standard of the type), possibly ninth century, 25-30 feet in diameter, with a wall eight feet high and a narrow protruding entrance, the constricted nature of which may be suggestive of entering a womb. On the exterior of the temple are nine niches with mostly *aghora* Yoginīs of the type we might expect from our detailed discussions above. These deities seem to be placed to guard and protect the shrine. Figure 2 is one example of these (discussed above), and Figure 9 is another. Most of the figures stand upon an apparently 'happy-to-be-severed' head (which D. White takes as sufficient evidence of the practice of human sacrifice), and hold a weapon and a skull bowl. Figure 9 is rather less fierce, and her niche is suggestive of the strong connection to

---

<sup>5</sup> The name of the Yoginīs in textual sources such as the Skanda Purāṇa clearly show this connection, e.g. Shivadūtī, Shāmbhavī, Shivā, Shaṅkarapriyā, Gaurī, Sharvā, etc.

nature we are positing for the Yoginīs. Foliage climbs the edge of the niche to her right, while animals graze and gaze up at her peacefully below. The Yoginī's pose as well is relaxed and easeful as she gently rests her weight on her left foot, creating a subtle suggestion of the *tribhanga* posture. She holds a sword which belies the benign expression on her face.

Within the Hirapur shrine, we are met with a surprise. After contemplating in such detail the mostly transgressive nature of the Yoginīs, I myself was stunned to discover that the interior contains a whole series of extremely sweet, *saumya* Yoginīs that seem to more closely resemble indolent maidens (*alāsa kanyās*) or *apsarases* than the Yoginīs we have been discussing! These finely carved, frequently two-armed Yoginīs are shown in various poses and activities including playing a drum, adjusting an anklet, hunting, riding on wheels, and standing atop a tree. In Figure 10 we see the detail in the elaborate jewelled headdress and belt, the lines of the garment wrapping the upper thighs, and the craftsmanship in the gentle smile in the full face that is typical of these images. It appears that a portion of her garment flies out this figure in low relief, perhaps blown by the wind as in the stories of the *apsarases* in epic literature. The vehicle is rather less carefully carved; it looks as though it may be a part of the sandstone niche rather than chlorite. The Yoginī adjusting her anklet in Figure 11 shows wonderful detail in her fine-grained bun of hair and the intentness of her expression as her brows draw together in focus—but still wearing an enigmatic smile. The figure calls to mind a contemporary nearby depiction of the same theme, on the Rājarāṇī temple in Bhubaneswara (Figure 12). The sculptures are clearly related in style. They wear similar garments, with jewelled belt and hanging piece in the middle to secure the cloth, and an upper garment that

covers only the breasts (as evinced by the chain which encircles them and presumably continues around the back). They have similar hairstyles, with lots of hair bound up in a bun to one side. The somewhat unrealistic shaping of the torso into an hourglass figure is also similar. However, there are subtle elements of composition, such as posturing and expression, that for me create a whole different feel between the two. Figure 12 leans on a support while she lazily adjusts her anklet without looking at it, and seems perhaps slightly tipsy in her half-closed eyes and lackadaisical smile. Figure 11, on the other hand, balances on one foot with perfect equanimity, gently focusing on her task. Like the other Hirapur *saumya* Yoginīs, she possesses a calm self-assured grace and poise, as if she is content in her own divinity. Perhaps this is reading too much in, but I would point towards the grace and lyricism of the huntress in Figure 13 to further support this perspective. The lines of the latter's bow and string (now missing) would have added to the flow and serene movement of the figure.<sup>6</sup>

These apparently highly cultured and sophisticated Yoginīs appear not to fit the paradigm presented in this paper of Yoginīs as personifications of forces of nature. However, I would refute this perception on two levels. First, women themselves are considered a 'force of nature' in Indian thought. George Hart and others have ably shown how in south India, women in an uncontrolled state were thought of as inauspicious and dangerous, and women whose power (*śakti*) was controlled (such as by a husband) were auspicious.<sup>7</sup> This state of nature being under the control of culture was symbolised by bound hair and ornaments. This theme is most fully brought out in the great Tamil

---

<sup>6</sup> Note also the curious double-vāhana below of a male and female bovine.

<sup>7</sup> See Hart's *The Poems of Ancient Tamil*, esp. pp. 93-118.

epic poem, the *Cilappatikāram*, in which a woman whose husband is unjustly killed breaks her bangles, unleashes the full fury of her uncontained and uncontrolled feminine rage on Madurai (burning it to the ground), and finally is transformed into an apotheosis of the goddess Pattini Tevi. All women possess this energy in its potential form, so the *saumya* aspects of the Yoginīs at Hirapur should not be misleading. Secondly, there are subtle signs of nature in their vehicles, in the carvings of foliage, and in the implied bucolic settings of several of their pastimes (e.g. respectable women did not go hunting, but Yoginīs certainly did).

A final note on the Hirapur temples concerns the extraordinary Bhairava images in the centre. These include the relatively rare and fascinating image of Ekapāda Shiva, the one-legged ithyphallic form of mysterious origin (depicted in Huntington 19.43). It should be noted here that the *Ekapāda-tantra* is one of the canonical tāntric texts of the Śaivāgama corpus.

One of the most compelling of the Yoginī shrines still existing is the circular shrine of the 81 Yoginīs in Bheraghat, Madhya Pradesh. It has a diameter of 125 feet, and its opening is a mere break in the wall. (127) Dehejia has shown in her reader article that the worship of the 81 Yoginīs is specifically intended for the powers and attainments sought by royalty, demonstrating that this kind of Tāntric ritual was adopted in high-caste arenas, though the positioning of the shrine on an isolated hilltop would imply that it remained highly secret. It is in fact a curious feature of Tantrism that in the mediaeval period it can be found in the highest and lowest strata of society, even a (transgressive) mix of the two, but more rarely in the middle.



The array of life-size Yoginīs at Bheraghat is (or was; few of the images survive intact) magnificent and awe-inspiring in both content and form. They fit more precisely the conception of Yoginīs we have formed from our consideration of Kaulism—beings primarily of *power*. They are much more elaborate and sophisticated in their carving than the Yoginīs we have seen thus far, their slabs crowded with attendants, flying worshippers at the top, and decorated with regal seats. Perhaps one of the most interesting of the images is that of Sarvatomukhī, ‘she who faces all (directions)’. (Figures 14-15) She once bristled with twelve arms, presumably holding an impressive array of attributes. She wears a lower garment, the fine cloth of which is indicated by undulating lines on her legs. Her rich jewellery is incongruously coupled with a large and fearsome skull pendent. Just below her lotus pedestal is a cakra which, following Shrīvidyā t̃āntric tradition, we might identify as her subtle (*sūkṣma*) form, containing within it the seed-mantra HRĪṂ, her *atisūkṣma* or most subtle form as sound vibration. Most interesting to me, however, are her three visible faces. Her right face is *aghora*, with staring eyes, fangs, a skull in the headdress, and a claw-like upper earring. The left face is *saumya*, with sensuously half-closed eyes, a sweet, full-lipped mouth, and sinuously curving eyebrows. The central face is more *aghora* than *saumya*, but still charts a middle ground between the two. The eyes are wide, but not quite as wide as the right face’s; the lips are pulled back, exposing teeth but no fangs; and a third eye is lightly incised. The mouth ambiguously hovers in a wonderful fashion between a smile and a snarl, and the wrinkles at the corners of the mouth and the dimpled chin are the thoughtful touches of a master craftsman. I believe there are clear parallels between this form and that of the famous three-faced massive so-called ‘Sadāśiva’

sculpture at Elephanta (Figure 16). There too, we have a three-faced image: the proper right face *aghora*, the left *saumya*, the middle neutral. The ‘Bhairava’ face on the right has fangs and a moustache, with snakes writhing through the hair and a skull and foliage also visible there. The ‘Umā’ face on the left is so called because it is so feminine, with a jewelled brooch in the hair and feminine eyes and mouth, and what seem to be flowers before her. The central face is a study in serene neutrality, with an elaborate headdress and necklaces, as also on the image at Bheraghat. Perhaps there can be no direct indebtedness here, but the treatment of the theme certainly seems at least parallel, and both are in the Shaiva sphere.

We will briefly allude to some of the other striking images at Bheraghat, and some of their parallels. Antakārī (Figure 17) is a stunning image, with an exquisitely wrought body (more naturalistic than those at Hirapur), with a gently modelled abdomen, full thighs, and unnaturally globular breasts. The body contrasts with her lolling tongue and wide staring eyes. A three-headed snake rearing up before the double halo of what could be horripillated dreadlocks completes the paradoxical picture. There are also animal-headed Yoginīs at the site, including a lovely example of the horse-headed Eruḍi. (Figure 18) Note the detail and symmetry of the impressive headdress. Finally, there is also a Durgā Mahiṣāsura-mardini (but labelled with a local name of Teramvā), a wonderful piece and an exception to the otherwise consistent *lalitāsana* postures at the site. (Figure 19) Durgā has the dynamic pose typical of the theme, one leg planted while the other subdues the buffalo; her 18 (!) arms bristling with weapons, yet her face totally impassive and secure in her competence. The buffalo at her feet appears to be headed in mid-spring while Durgā’s lion mount

gnaws ferociously on its rump. The intricacy and subtlety of the image could be described at much greater length; note, for example, the energetic movement of the side figures: the left one clammers upward and both have their faces turned exultantly up towards the deity.

The Huntington image that seems stylistically most similar to the Bheraghat Yoginīs seems to me to be the Tārā of 11<sup>th</sup> century Sārnāth (Figure 20). Not too far in time or space, this image has the same treatment of the body, with gently swelling and curving hips, tapering cylinder thighs, and large, hemispherical breasts. Clothes and ornaments are also similar: a thin, leg-hugging lower garment hanging from a belt that also suspends various fine chains and pendants; gravity-defying necklaces that cling to the body; and armbands and headdress (here broken). The facial features are also very close: the provocative, smirking mouth, lidded eyes and undulating eyebrow line. In fact, comparing the lips and eyebrows with Fig. 19, I am inclined to suggest that they even came from the same workshop. For an additional comparison of around the same time but far-removed in space, see the female figures on the walls of Nageśvarasvāmi temple, Kumbakonam (Huntington 21.12) and Koranganātha temple, Srinivasanallur (21.18). There are interesting parallels as well as differences in the treatment of the body, the heavy breasts, swelling stomach, the lower garment, and so on.

The final image type I must touch on is that of the truly horrific and revolting Yoginīs, such as Caṇḍikā and Camuṇḍā. A broken piece of one of these figures is enough to convey their shock value (Figure 21). Tendons stand out on the emaciated and painfully drawn neck; the cheeks are sunken, the eyes staring blankly; the lips are drawn back in a terrible grimace that suggests the expression of one emitting the final death rattle. Her breasts hang as flaccid pendants and there is

what appears to be a severed head of a child in her headdress, its expression one of terrified rictus. The image is very disturbing as a whole. A similar, complete image is found at Lokhari. The Yoginī has skeletal limbs and a corpse *vāhana*; one hand holds an eviscerating knife, another a skull-bowl, and a third a piece of flesh she is chewing. What the images signify and why anyone might worship them will be touched upon in the conclusion.

Space limitations do not permit us to visit any other Yoginī temples or remains, but there are several others of differing types than the ones we have visited. Of particular note is the Ranipur-Jharial temple, which includes 64 *dancing* Yoginīs and a central dancing (three-faced, ithyphallic) Shiva (103-5); the Rikhiyan Yoginīs, which include a rare skull-headed Yoginī and Mātṛkās that resemble the ones in the Kailāsanātha Ellora cave; and the aforementioned Lokhari animal Yoginīs (only the Mātṛkās are ‘human’ here).

### *Conclusion*

We have explored many different facets of Yoginīs as goddesses and spirits, and seen how they were brought into the world of Tāntric ritual worship. I remain more convinced than ever that the bewildering array of Yoginīs represents the multiplicity of natural powers and forces at work in the cosmos, powers which can be dangerous or favourable, depending on the degree to which the devotee is able to approach, appease, channel, and contain them. For the Yoginī-worshiper, the world is filled with these energies. The *Mahābhārata* describes the divine Mothers as dwelling in trees, in open spaces, at the meeting of crossroads, in

caves, cemeteries, mountains and waterfalls. They speak different languages (representing the different regions and tribes of India?). (68) Thus we find Yoginīs personifying animal powers (Lokhari), the innate power of women (Hirapur), the powers of the elements, of trees, of sexual energy (Kamadā at Bheraghat), of emotional states such as anger (Durgā) and fear. We find Yoginīs even embodying the most difficult forces of nature for us to accept: death and decay (Camuṇḍā etc.). These too need to be honoured, propitiated, invoked and sublimated into the raw energy (*śakti*) they are at essence, energy that may be then used for any purpose, including spiritual liberation. The remote location of all of the Yoginī temples suggest they were used for transgressive ritual, whether bizarre ritual performances that gained the practitioners terrible powers at the terrible risk of being drawn ever deeper into *saṁsāra*, or carefully controlled transgression aimed at transforming the consciousness of the practitioner through transcendence of all socially constructed categories in favour of the intrinsic freedom (*svatāntrya*) of one's true being. Even today, goddess worship of various kinds is looked down upon in places as 'grāmya' or 'villagey' and yet, whether publicly or not, nearly everyone in India, it seems, propitiates goddesses as the ones who have the true competence and efficacy (*kriyāśakti*) to accomplish things in this world. Thus our Yoginīs are part of an ancient Indian religious tradition in no danger of dying out even today.

## Bibliography

Dehejia, Vidya. *Yoginī Cult and Temples: a Tantric Tradition*. New Delhi: National Museum, 1986.

Dyczkowski, Mark S.G. *The Canon of the Shaivāgama and the Kujjikā Tantras of the Western Kaula Tradition*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988.

Huntington, Susan L. *The Art of Ancient India*. New York: Weatherhill, 1985.

Sanderson, Alexis. “Shaivism and the Tantric Traditions” in *The World’s Religions*, ed. Stewart Sutherland, et. Al. London: Routledge, 1988.