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The Goddess Hingalaja of the Yogini Shrine at Khajuraho

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Khajuraho in Chhatarpur district of central India has magnificent temples, dedicated to Visnu, Siva, Surya, and Jain pontiffs, which were constructed during the reign of the powerful Candella dynasty. But away from the main group of 23 sculpted temples, built in elegant Nagara style of architecture, there is a unique open-air rectangular sanctuary, dedicated to the Chausatha or Sixty-four Yoginis (Fig. 1). Unlike the profusely



Fig. 1.

The Yogini Temple at Khajuraho (Photo: Devangana Desai)

sculpted temples of the site, the Yogini sanctuary is not decorated with sculptures – not to mention that there is not a single erotic figure on its walls. Built on the hill-like rock formation, it is situated to the southwest of the Shivasagar tank. It has an open-air courtyard around which are 67

cells, 33 on either side of a large, principal cell (Fig. 2). When Major Alexander Cunningham (later to become the Director General of the

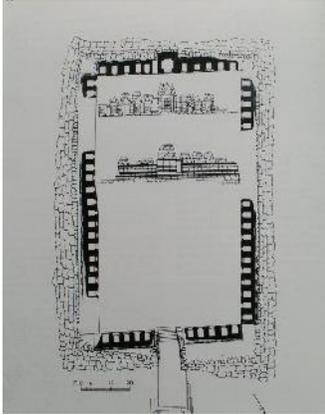


Fig. 2 Plan, Yogini Shrine, Khajuraho. (Courtesy: Archaeological

Survey of India, New Delhi, and the American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon)

Archaeological Survey of India) visited this shrine in 1864¹, he could find only three images *in situ*, namely, the goddess Durga Mahisasuramardini (Fig. 3), inscribed “Hinghalaja” on its pedestal (as in Fig. 4), .9 m (3 ft) high, which was placed in the principal cell, and the two Matrkas, Brahmani and Mahesvari, inscribed, (as in Fig. 4), .68 m (2 ft 3 ins.) high, placed in the smaller cells which flanked this central shrine. These three images are now sheltered in the site museum. The images are made of sandstone, but the temple is built of coarse local granite blocks. Amazingly, other cells were empty and no other images were found from this sanctuary. Where could these images have disappeared? Did the village people, out of fear of the Yoginis, bury their images?²

Outside the Yogini sanctuary and facing it, Cunningham reported a small shrine of Ganesa, in his dancing form, which was later shifted to the site Museum. Ganesa is associated with the Mothers since at least 6th century CE as we find his images along with the Matrkas in several sites of India.³

The Sixty-four Yoginis shrine of Khajuraho is an important sanctuary of the Yogini cult that was widespread in the vast region

between central India and Orissa in the period *circa* 900 to 1400 and even later. The Yoginis are manifestations of the Great Goddess Devi, or her companions (*sakhis*) who help Devi in her battles with various demons. They take various forms – of animals, birds, insects and human females. Worship of the Yoginis was prevalent in the Candella domain,⁴ as evidenced from the find of Yogini images and shrines not only at Khajuraho, but also at Rikhiyan and Lokhari in Banda district, Dudahi near Lalitpur, and Mitauli and Naresar near Gwalior, which were under the Kacchapagatas, feudatories of the Candellas.

It is significant that the Durga image of the central cell of the Khajuraho Yogini sanctuary is inscribed with the label “Hinghalaja” (Fig. 4). This name brings to mind the famous *pitha* Hingula where the head or crown (*brahmarandhra*) of Sati fell, according to the Sakta texts



Fig. 3. Durga-Mahisasuramardini, inscribed Hinghalaja, found from the principal cell of the Yogini temple (Photo: Devangana Desai)

Pithanirnaya and *Tantracudamani*, while in another version recorded by D. C. Sircar⁵, the navel of the goddess is associated with this *pitha*. Her main shrine at Hinglaj (ancient Hingula or Hingulata) in Baluchistan on the Makran coast (now Pakistan) was the most sacred centre of pilgrimage for the ascetics of the Natha sect. It is said to enshrine a non-iconic form of the goddess. This goddess was locally known as Bibi Nana.⁶

The goddess Hingalaja is revered in many parts of northern and western India. She has temples at Chaul in the Colaba district of Maharashtra, and also near Bhuj in Kutch.⁷ A medieval site on the border of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan has been named Hingalajagadh, which had a Yogini temple in the 10th century. The Hingalajgadh Yogini images, sculpted in Paramara style, are now preserved in the museums at Bhopal, Indore and Jhansi.⁸ Even in the city of Mumbai, there is a shrine dedicated to the goddess Hingalaja.

The goddess Hinghalaja at Khajuraho is represented in the form of eight-armed Durga Mahisasuramardini (see Fig. 3). Her hair is arranged in *dhammilla* type of headdress, which is an early feature at Khajuraho, noticed in the 10th century temples, but rare after about CE 1000.⁹ A *kirtimukha* ('mask of glory') decorates the centre of the hairdo. Among the preserved hands of the deity, the lower right is in *varada*, the boon giving gesture, and the upper right holds a sword in an act of slaying the buffalo demon. The upper left hand holds a shield, the other one a bow, and another hand holds tight the hind feet of the buffalo demon. Her right foot is laid on the buffalo, while the left one is balanced on the ground. What is important to notice is the powerful manner in which she has held the buffalo upside down, holding it with its hind legs and piercing it with her *trisula* near its genitals. Similar depiction of the goddess holding the buffalo upside down is seen in three other smaller sculptures at Khajuraho

and an 11th century image from Shahdol, now in the Dhubela Museum,¹⁰ but was not much prevalent in other contemporaneous sites. The composition of the Khajuraho figure is less elaborate than that of the Shahdol Mahisasuramardini with 12 arms and having many attendants.

There are two seated female figures on the upper side of the Hinghalaja slab and two standing ones on the ground level. These *sakhis* or attending *yoginis* also wear *dhammilla* hair style. The goddess's lion mount pounces on the buffalo demon from the back.

Among other early representations of Durga Mahisasuramardini at Khajuraho, mention may be made of an exquisite image recently excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India from Satdhara mound in the northern zone of Khajuraho.¹¹ Unlike the upturned Mahisa of the Hinghalaja of the Yogini temple, the demon emerges from the animal body of Mahisa in case of the excavated 12-armed Durga of Satdhara mound. Stylistically, both these images of Durga Mahisasuramardini, though not far from each other in time, are quite different. The Satdhara figure shows some affinity to the Pratihara sculptures of Kanauj in its facial features, hair curls near the forehead, and ornaments. Slightly later in time is another image of Durga Mahisasuramardini with ten arms in a niche of *pradaksina-patha* in the Visnu-Vaikuntha (Lakshmana) temple consecrated at Khajuraho in CE 954. There is a rare depiction of *kucabandha* on her breasts. She places her right foot on the buffalo demon whose head is severed, while a mutilated figure of the demon in human form appears besides the animal form. But this goddess too does not hold the buffalo demon upside down like the goddess Hinghalaja of the 64-Yoginis temple.¹²

A question which arises is whether the inscribed label "Hinghalaja" (Fig. 4) on the Yogini temple image is original, i. e. of the time of the



Fig.4. Label Inscriptions:

“Mahesvari” and “Hinghalaja” (Courtesy: A. Cunningham,ASI Report, Vol. XXI, 1885)

sculpture, or whether it was incised later on the pedestal by followers of the Natha sect, who were ardent worshippers of the Hingalaja. Scholars have differed on the paleography of the label inscription for dating this image. Cunningham says that the characters of the two inscriptions of the Yogini temple appear to be older than those of the dated Khajuraho inscriptions, and may date from the very foundation of the Candella rule, or from the early part of the 9th century.¹³ Krishna Deva finds that the forms of the letters, particularly “gha” and “ha” as well as the massive and squat forms of the goddess suggest a date between CE 850 and 900.¹⁴ Vidya Dehejia points out that “in view of the brevity of the inscriptions, the paleographic evidence would be unreliable for dating the temple”. She suggests a date closer to the middle of the 10th century.¹⁵ In any case, none of the scholars except L. K. Tripathi have doubted that the inscription can be of later date. Tripathi dates the temple to 11th century on the grounds of the presence of the *jadyakumbha* moulding as well as the division of the wall into two zones on the outer face of the sanctuary.¹⁶

When the late Prof. H. C. Bhayani, eminent authority on Linguistics, Prakrit and Apabhhransha language, saw my book, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, and read the name “Hinghalaja” of the goddess of the Yogini shrine, he contacted me and said that from the point of view of Linguistics, the word “Hinghalaja could not have been earlier than the 11th century. As the original word is “Hingalaja”, derived from the name

Hingalaja *pitha* of Baluchistan, the changes from “*ga*” to “*gha*” in the word paleographically indicates a later development.¹⁷

From the analysis by Prof. Bhayani, we can say that though the sculptured image of this goddess can stylistically be of CE 900, the label on its pedestal could not have been earlier than 11th century. There could be a time gap between the sculpture of the goddess and its inscribed label. This means that the label was put later on the existing image of the goddess.

Who could have inscribed the name “Hinghalaja” below the image of Durga Mahisasuramardini? It may be pointed out that only two out of three images found from the Yogini temple bear their names inscribed at Khajuraho. The other Matrkas and Yogini images of Khajuraho do not have inscribed labels.

In connection with the Natha Yogis who worshipped Hingalaja, it is significant to mention that when the Arabic traveler Ibn Battuta visited Khajuraho in 1335, he saw a group of “Jogis” with long clotted hair, living near a large lake.¹⁸ He says that on account of practising asceticism their colour had become extremely yellow. They were known for a cure of leprosy and elephantiasis. We wonder whether these “Jogis” seen by Ibn Battuta could be the Natha Siddhas who practised Yoga, alchemy (Rasayana) and healing. Though the exact date of the Natha guru Gorakhnatha is not known, he is said to have lived some time between the 9th and 12th centuries.

It is difficult to say whether the Jogis came to Khajuraho after the main temple building phase was over in about 1150 CE or whether they arrived at the time when the temples were still being constructed. Interestingly, more than 70 ascetic figures are depicted in sculpture on the *rajasenaka* row of the Devi Jagadamba (originally Visnu) temple and

Citragupta (Surya) temple. These are also seen on the two Siva temples, namely the Visvanatha and the Kandariya Mahadeva.¹⁹ It cannot be verified whether these figures portray particular saints of a religious sect or whether they represent ascetics in general – gurus and *siddhas*. But woman teachers or female *yoginis* are not seen in sculptures of these temples, except perhaps of the woman with *rudraksa* beads in the head-down pose of a Siva temple. Unlike other temples of Khajuraho, erotic figures were not carved on the Chausath Yogini shrine.

Interestingly, the text of Matsyendranatha tradition, called *Nityahnikatilakam*, dated to 1395, mentions ‘Sri Kharjurananda Natha’ in its list of teachers.²⁰ One wonders whether Sri Kharjurananda Natha was associated with the town Kharjuravahaka (Khajuraho). However the text says that the sage acquired this name because of his magical power: “by just one look he uprooted a Kharjura tree”.

It may be surmised that the Yogini shrine at Khajuraho was built in about CE 900 and worship there could have been at various levels – both Kaula and non-Kaula – for appeasement and averting of diseases, calamities, etc. and for *siddhis* and yogic *sadhana*.²¹ The Puranas such as the *Agni Purana* had also recognized the Yoginis as deities and listed their names starting from the direction northeast. The rulers as well as the common folk worshipped the Yoginis.

In about the 11th century, the Nathas, who were worshippers of the goddess Hingalaja, identified the goddess Durga of the Yogini shrine at Khajuraho with Hingalaja. They were possibly the “Jogis” seen by the Arabic traveler Ibn Battuta in 1335, when the main period of construction of temples was over at Khajuraho.

We may mention that the goddess ‘Hingula’ was also associated with goddesses Kottari, Nana and Charchika.²² The goddess Kottari is

worshipped at Hingula *pitha* according to the *Pithanirnaya*.²³ The goddess Hingalaja is associated with the goddess Carcika in the *Vamana Purana*. Carcika is the presiding deity of the mount Hingula. The goddess Hingalaja is identified with the Great Goddess Durga in the *Durga Calisa*, recited even today. “*O Bhavani, the famous goddess Hingalaja is no one else but you yourself.*” So she is worshipped as Durga irrespective of particular sectarian affiliation.

The importance of the goddess Hingalaja in religious life can be seen from the fact that recently a shrine to Hingalaja has been consecrated near Jabalpur by the Sankaracarya of Dwarka. As the Baluchistan Hingalaja *pitha* is inaccessible to devotees, the Swami found a similar spot and a cave-like rock where the goddess Hingalaja is invoked.

Today, the Yogini sanctuary at Khajuraho is bereft of images. But every year during the Navaratri festival in the month of Asvina (October) associated with the Great goddess Durga, village women bring earthen pots with sprouted millet and place these around the central cell.

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Fig. 4. Label inscriptions: ‘Mahesvari’ and ‘Hinghalaja’ (Courtesy: A. Cunningham, ASI Report, Vol. XXI, 1885, Reprint, 2000)

Notes and References

(Please see endnotes)

¹ Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India Report*, Vol. II, 1864-65, Reprinted by ASI, Delhi in 2000, pp. 416-418; Vol. XXI, 1883-84, Reprinted by ASI Delhi 2000, p. 57

² I may mention that there are three detached images, which could represent Yoginis. My recent article: "Rksamata, The Bear-faced Yogini from Khajuraho", in *Bilvapatra*, Felicitation Vol. In honour of Dr. N. P. Joshi, Ed. Kamal Giri and Maruti Nandan P. Tiwari, under publication by Indian Art History Congress, Patna Session, 2011

³ Devangana Desai, "Dancing Ganesa", *Pushpanjali*, 1980; under publication in *Art and Icon*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

⁴ Vidya Dehejia, *Yogini, Cult and Temples, A Tantric Tradition*, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 86-90

⁵ D. C. Sircar, *The Sakta Pithas*, second ed., Delhi, 1973, p. 33

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 85

⁷ G. W. Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis*, first ed. 1938, reprint, Delhi, 1989, p. 169

⁸ Vidya Dehejia, *op. cit.* pp. 153-154

⁹ Krishna Deva, *Temples of Khajuraho*, Vol. I, pp. 272-75. The *dhammilla* type of headdress is seen in many sculptures of the Laksmana (CE 954), Parsvanatha (c. 970), and the Visvanatha (CE 999), but only in three examples in the Kandariya (c. 1030), while it is conspicuous by its absence in the Vamana temple (c. 1050-75).

¹⁰ Vidya Dehejia, *Yogini, Cult and Temples*, p. 172

¹¹ *Indian Archaeology, 1988-89, A Review*, plate LVII, B. The image is in the site museum.

¹² Devangana Desai, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, Mumbai, 1996, p. 132, photo 135

¹³ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, Vol. XXI, p. 57

¹⁴ Krishna Deva, *op. cit.*, p. 26

¹⁵ Vidya Dehejia, *op. cit.*, p. 117

¹⁶ L. K. Tripathi, "Chausatha Yogini Temple, Khajuraho", *Journal of the Indian Society of Indian Art*, New Series, Vol. 6, pp. 33-42

¹⁷ Prof. H. C. Bhayani in a letter to me in 1996

¹⁸ *The Rehala of Ibn Battuta*, ed. and translation Mahadi Husain, G.O.S. No. 122, Baroda, 1976

¹⁹ Devangana Desai, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, pp. 78-80, photos 80-82

²⁰ P. C. Bagchi in Introduction to the *Kaulajnana-nirnaya*. The text is noticed by H. P. Shastri in his two Nepal Catalogues, I, pp. 111-112; II, pp. 70, 82.

²¹ Devangana Desai, *op. cit.* pp. 91-93

²² V.S. Agrawala, *Ancient Indian Folk Cults*, pp. 160-61, 192

²³ Sircar, *op. cit.* p. 39