

‘Many-Armed,’ ‘Angry,’ ‘Demons’ and ‘Monsters’ in Colonial Writings

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Hindu beliefs and religious art have been attracting scholars from across the world from the early modern centuries onwards. Buddhism was also equally noted for the wider attention that it received in the last few centuries. The initial response of Europe in the era of colonialism towards Hinduism and Buddhism was negative. These works represented the deities in South Asian iconography as ‘many-armed’, ‘angry’ demons,’ ‘monsters’ and ‘devils.’ The purpose of this paper is to understand how such portrayals of the Hindu and Buddhist deities were influenced by stereotyped notions about the eastern religious traditions and the impact of these studies on subsequent histories.

‘False deities’ in European travel writings

It was the colonial scholars who had in the late 19th and early 20th centuries tried to make some comparative studies on the deities and the notions behind the manner of their depiction. In the mid-17th century, the European travellers such as Peetro della Valle looked down upon the ‘false deities’ having many faces and arms. That was a time when the westerners had considered the people in the East, including India, as ‘foolish and ignorant’ and their beliefs as ‘vulgar.’ So, these Europeans described the deities of the ‘barbarians’ as ‘monstrous figures.’ The religion of the country was designated as ‘demoniac.’ Such a misrepresentation of the Indian religious art had its basis in their reading of the reports of the 16th century in Jesuit missionaries as well. The terms ‘demoniac’, ‘devil’ etc were labels that travellers such as Rogerius used to characterise the figures having several heads and arms. The very sight of these deities evoked expressions such as ‘terrifying’ and ‘horrible.’ According to the 19th century European traveller in South Asia, the figures of gods and goddesses worshipped in the region evoked a sense of horror. They were at a loss to understand why the deities were objects of both fear and respect.

Demons, monsters, and devils

When compared to Buddhism and Jainism, the Hindu religious tradition, especially Brahmanism, had come under a lot of ridicule in the early 19th century as well. In 1819, William Erskine wrote thus:

Any monster, any figure partly brutal, any multiplicity of heads or hands in the object adored, indicate a Brahmanical place of worship. . . The presence of umbrella-covered pyramids or semi-globes, and of simple human figures sitting cross-legged or standing in a meditative posture, as certainly shows

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the execution to be Boudhist. The twenty-four saintly figures with out the pyramid proves a temple to be Jaine.¹

From the late 19th century onwards, the European scholars had grasped the mythologies behind the depiction of deities in countries such as India and Tibet. Notable among them was L Austine Waddell M.B whose work '*The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*' (1894) made an attempt to trace the origins of the ideas of gods and goddesses among the Tibetan Buddhists back to the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of the early centuries of the Christian era. He had found that 'devil worship' was a part of the tradition of countries, including Ceylon. Like many other Europeans of his time, Waddell was also conscious of the 'bizarre crowd of aboriginal gods and hydra-headed demons' he found in the East. Waddell makes a distinction between the two types of Buddhist icons – angry (*To-Wo*) and mild (*Zi-wa*).

There was a realization that all the Buddhist icons were not of the 'angry' type. Waddell, however, characterizes the Lamaist icons of a rude nature as 'the awkward forms of Hindu fancy.' Thus, Waddell's description of Lamaism was also concerned with showing how Brahmanism influenced by the Buddhist beliefs in Tibet. It was argued that Mahayanism 'promoted to immortal rank many of the demons of the Sivaist pantheon.' The 'demon-kings' of Tibet, according to Waddell, were 'repulsive monsters of the type of the Hindu devil Siva.' The early phase of Buddhism is described in his work as 'primitive Buddhism'. The introduction of icons by Mahayanists was what disturbed the colonial historians like Waddell. European understanding of demons and witches shaped Waddell's understanding of the deities in Buddhism in Tibet. That explains why he designates Dakkinis, one of the seven categories of deities he listed, as witches. The 'angry' deities were 'terrible in its elaborate ugliness, with disproportionately large scowling brows, and cruel, callous eyes, and usually with a third eye in the centre of the forehead.' On the other hand, the mild deities were represented 'as young Indian princes and princesses seated usually on lotus thrones.' Waddell also makes one more category of 'fiercest' (*Drag-Po*) deities. These deities 'have usually chaplets of skulls encircled by tongues of flames; and they tread upon writhing victims and prostrate bodies.'

Waddell's was one of the most significant contributions to the Lamaist tradition of Tibet. He was also aware of the influence of Buddhism on the shaping of Brahmanical representation of deities. However, a cultural bias can be traced throughout his work. While describing Marici, Waddell makes it clear that she is 'the consort of the demon-general, 'the horse-necked Tamdin.' Even more mercilessness is his characterization of Vajra-Bhairava as 'hideous creature.' He informs us that Vajra Bhairava is 'a form of Siva as the destroyer of the king of the dead, namely, as Yamantaka.' The Buddhist goddess of Tibet, Lha-mo or pal-Idan-Lha-mo is described as a 'great she-devil, like her prototype the goddess Durga of Brahmanism.' On the other hand, the Yakshinis ('the stealers of children of general myths'), are designated as 'witch-women.' Waddell had mastered a thorough grasp of the evolution of Buddhism in India. He, however, had found so much of 'ferocious' aspects in Lamaism because he believed that a 'distorted form of Buddhism' was introduced in Tibet in the middle of the 7th century A.D. The distortion occurred in the previous one and a half centuries under the impact of Yogachara Buddhists and Tantrism or Sivaic mysticism. The process of 'distortion' was completed by the 10th century when 'the monstrous and polydemonist doctrine, the *Kalacakra*, with its demoniacal Buddhas,' spread from North India, Kashmir and Nepal. Thus, 'the bulk of the Lamaist cults comprise much deep-rooted devil-worship and sorcery.'

Towards a better understanding

In the early 20th century, European scholarship made some more serious and attempts at understanding the religious art and belief systems of India and other parts of South Asia. At the start of the last century, E B Havell made an important statement that ‘No European can appreciate Indian art who does not divest himself of his Western prepossessions, endeavour to understand Indian thought, and place himself at the Indian point of view.’ For Havell, the icons of goddesses like Kali did not evoke a response similar to that of Waddell. Quoting the Sakta literature, he describes Kali as ‘the personification of the supreme power which withdraws everything into Herself at the dissolution of the Universe.’ His work *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1908) paid glowing tributes to the religious art of India.

K J Saunders, in a small but exhaustive study titled *The story of Buddhism* (1916), remarks that students of Christianity need a better understanding of the religious principles of Buddhism. He makes a detailed account of Buddhism in Asia. Saunders too characterized Tibetan Buddhism as ‘largely a religion of fear- fear of the Lamas, fear of the demons, fear of the many gods who crowd the Lamaistic pantheon.’² He also found a ‘god making fancy’ among the Tibetans. Unlike Waddell, Saunders was not unduly antagonistic towards the influence of Brahmanical Hinduism on Buddhism. Saunders describes the early phase of Buddhism, also known as primitive Buddhism, as one in which trust was given to ‘salvation by man’s own effort.’ In Mahayanist phase, there was also trust ‘in the help of god.’³ Saunders describes two types of Tara – one as the consort of Avalokiteswara and the other as ‘a monstrous figure with three faces and eight arms.’⁴ One of the faces was that of a sow. It was these features, which made him characterise Tara figure as ‘monstrous.’

Among the important works which had gone into the different aspects of transformation of the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina iconographic traditions in India in the early part of the 20th century was A A Macdonnell’s *India’s Past A Survey of her Literatures, Religions, Languages and Antiquities* (1927). Macdonnell was one of the earliest to avoid using terms which reflected a deeper bias towards the religious systems of the East. It was scholars like him who tried to understand how iconography came to depict ‘many-armed’ deities. Macdonnell found that the ‘many-armed’ deities appeared in Hindu iconography as ‘an innovation’ at the end of the first century A.D. He also cited numismatic evidence for stating that in the period preceding it, ‘the gods were regarded as normally human in appearance.’ By ‘normally human appearance’, he meant deities with one head and two arms. Macdonnell points out,

On a coin of the Graeco-Indian king Kadphises II, dating from about 50 A.D, Siva still appears as a two-armed deity; but in the reigns of his successors Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva, four armed gods become common beside two-armed examples, though the latter still continue to appear on coins till about 200 A.D.⁵

The iconographic representation of the deities such as Brahma, Siva and Vishnu closely reflected the portrayal of these higher gods in the epic and classical Sanskrit literature ‘as having four arms and one of them four heads also.’⁶ According to Macdonnell, the figure of Siva was the first to be represented with four arms.⁷ The innovation of depicting deities with more heads and arms is also referred to as ‘an abnormality.’ Buddhism, in its Mahayanist phase, merely borrowed the Brahmanical tradition. The four armed type originated in the early centuries of the Christian era. By the end of the Gupta era, the divine figures having eight hands began to be depicted. In some of the Siva images of the period following the

8th century, there were 16 hands.⁸ Macdonnell's thesis was that the practice of depicting Buddhist deities as having more than two hands derived from the Hindu tradition.

The depiction of animals as vehicles was one of the means by which the deities were given divinity and individuality in early sculpture. Macdonnell had also argued that the idea of divinities having multiple heads and hands was 'figuratively' expressed in the Rig Veda itself. Agni, according to him, is said to be three-headed, obviously because the sacrificial fire burns on three altars; and Visvakarma is four-armed (visvatobahu 'with an arm on every side'). The further divine characteristic of having four heads was added in the case of Brahma because his Vedic prototype Visvakarma is in the Rig Veda described as 'facing in all directions' (visvato-mukha) and in post-Vedic literature as 'four-faced' (catur-mukha). Hence Brahma always appears in sculpture with four heads as well as four arms.⁹

Macdonnell was of the view that the representation of Buddha in human form and the practice of worshipping him started from about 100 A.D. In the early phase, the Buddhists worshipped 'relics, stupas, bo-trees, foot prints of Buddha, and sacred symbols such as the trident (trisol) and the wheel of the law (cakra).¹⁰ Before the artists of Gandhara sculpted the Buddhist images, there were only depictions of men and animals in adoration at the stupas of Bharhut, Sanchi, and Bodh Gaya.¹¹ This, in effect, gave an earlier date for depicting gods in human form to the Brahmanical religion. Similarly, the Jaina images were also dated to the first centuries of the Christian era.¹² While commenting on the decline of Buddhism and Jainism, the colonial scholars including Macdonnell stressed the influence of Hindu ideals of gods and goddesses on these faiths. The degeneration of Buddhism, for instance, coincided with the process of absorption of elements from the Puranas at about 600 A.D.¹³ Yet another factor for the 'degradation' of 'Indian Buddhism' was said to be the influence of Saivite Tantras.¹⁴ Jainism was also portrayed as a faith which had borrowed many aspects of popular beliefs from the Buddhist Jatakas and the Puranas.¹⁵

Although the works of this period also continued to use terms such as demons for various deities in Hindu and Buddhist iconographies, they all showed a better understanding of the evolution of iconography in South Asia and South East Asia. *Indian Sculpture* (1933) by Stella Kramrisch was a significant contribution to the iconography of India. She was more sensitive to the religious sentiments of the people of this country and had a greater understanding of the history of the sub continent. Kramrisch has thus explained the evolution of the cult of anthropomorphic figures in Hinduism and other faiths as a process starting from the days of the Indus civilization. Image worship, according to her, was a trait of the masses. This may indicate a certain stereo-typed view of Indian sculpture. According to her, the Indian craftsman had not been responsible for the representation of the Buddha in non-iconic forms. The Buddha image of Mathura, in her view, was inspired by previous models, especially that of sculpting Yaksha figures. That implies that she rejects the role of Hellenism as the main factor behind the representation of the Buddha in human form. While the 19th century scholars treated the depiction of deities with multiple body parts as an essential element of backwardness in the culture of south Asia and south east Asia, Kramrisch traced its origins in the Indus civilization. She could identify this 'un-aryan' trait in the sculpture of the Mauryas as well. Thus, Kramrisch does not use terms such as demon, devil, monster etc to refer to gods and goddesses in Buddhist and Brahmanical iconographies. She has based her analysis of Indian religious art on the textual sources. That enabled her to explain the Saktis or Yoginis as 'celestial beauties'.

In *Buddhist Art in India, Ceylon, and Java* (1936), the Dutch Scholar, J.P.H., Vogel, refers to the icons such as Marici (Vajravarahi) with two human heads and a swine's snout, eight arms and various weapons merely as indicative of the changed beliefs and conventions of iconographic representation of divinities. He also cites the increasing tendency among the Buddhists to 'represent Bodisattvas and other divine beings with many heads and arms.'¹⁶ What distinguishes his work from other early works is the way he tried to trace the process of transformation of the 'various lower demons which had probably haunted the consciousness of the masses for ages' into 'gods.' These deities, he observes, 'were given a definite shape in accordance with the frightful and repulsive character.'¹⁷ Religious art of India had closely followed the traditional practice of carving figures including those of Yakshas and Yakshas. The same view was expressed in the work, *The Legacy of India* (1937). In his article *Indian Art and Archaeology*, K DE B Codrington, also attempted to link the later day images in Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions to the type of Yakshas found at Bharhut and Sanchi.¹⁸ He had remarked that the human figures on the early Stupas were later on employed in the service of Buddhism.¹⁹ In a similar manner, Brahmanism also absorbed 'the native deities of village India' and transformed them into the mother goddess figures known as *saptamatrkas*.²⁰ Jouveau Dubreul, in her work titled *Iconography of Southern India* (1937), gives some explanations for the depiction of multiple hands in idols. The deities were represented with four hands in order 'to express the force of the deity as well as to carry the distinctive emblems of the god.'²¹ According to her, the trend started from the 7th century A.D onwards.

Indian historians of colonial era and their perceptions

Of all the works on Buddhist iconography, the most important was produced by an Indian scholar named Benoytosh Bhattacharya. His work, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, was published in 1924. It was based on texts such as *Sadhanamala*. The work is a plain narrative of the features of Buddhist iconography and the aspects of belief connected to it. The author seems to be unconcerned with the criticisms of the Buddhist icons that had come from the likes of Waddell. At the same time, he identifies iconographic similarities between the figures in Brahmanism and Buddhism.²² He too takes note of the terrible and distorted features — 'distorted face, bare fangs, three eyes, protruding tongue, garland of heads and skulls, the tiger skin and ornament of snakes' — of the images such as those emanations of the Dhyani Buddha, Akshobhya.²³ In *War in Ancient India* (1944) by V R Ramachandra Dikshitar had given detailed explanations for the deities depicted with multiple body parts. All the deities, which had come under criticism in European writings, were projected as war gods and war goddesses – Visnu, Surya, Ganesa, Skanda, Siva, Durga, Virabhadra — engaged in a constant struggle with the Asuras or demons.²⁴ These deities began to be worshipped in human form 'only during the epoch of the Puranas.'²⁵

Post-independent histories and iconography

Post independent histories have also established the fact that worship of the mother goddess had existed as early as the proto-historic period. At the same time, it can't be stated with a certainty that the idea of female energy, as visualized in the later period, had existed in Harappan times. Similarly, the Mauryan female images have also been found to be those worshipped as divinities in the earlier period. Professor R S Sharma points out that 'Tantric texts and iconography gave a great importance to the cult of the mother goddess, which was confined not only to the Sakta system, but also appeared in a pre-eminent form in the Saiva, Vaishnava, Buddhist and Jaina systems.'²⁶ There occurred a great

transformation of the ‘aboriginal mother goddesses’ into the forms of Sakti in Puranic Hinduism and Tara in Buddhism.²⁷ The Puranas were compiled with a view to incorporate the local traditions.²⁸ Attempts have been made to trace the history of the many-faced gods back to the Indus civilization. There has not been a consensus among historians on whether the so-called Pasupati of the Harappans had been connected to the later belief systems. One thing is clear: whether it is ‘mother goddess or Pasupati, there was no presence of weapons in the hands of these earlier figures. The coins of the Kushan times bear trident bearing figure of Siva.²⁹ According to Romila Thapar, deities of the popular fertility cults ‘were modified to include many arms.’ This was intended at accommodating ‘a range of attributes associated with the deity so represented.’³⁰ Mythologies and iconography helped Puranic Hinduism in ‘inducting those outside the boundaries of varna society.’³¹ The same process occurred in Buddhism and Jainism.³²

In *The Art of Ancient India*, Buddhist Hindu Jain, Susan L Huntington holds the view that ‘angry’ forms of divinities became more popular under the impact of Tantrism.³³ Such a trend started in Buddhism and Brahmanism after the Kushan period.³⁴ Susan has also established that much of the features of the laterday Buddhism had come from Saiva practices.

Conclusion

The two religious systems, Brahmanism and Buddhism, had a powerful influence on the whole of South Asia and South East Asia. Colonial scholarship was foundational in enabling the later day Indian historians to interpret the evolution of religious art in the country. The above discussion has shown that in the early phase of European understanding of Indian religious art was marked by deep rooted prejudices. This was partly due to the influence of Jesuit reports and the travellers’ accounts. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some serious efforts were made to grasp the religious systems generated by the people of India at various stages. These writings shaped the historical understanding of the people in the country. Today, no historian would accept the idea of divinities in Hinduism and Buddhism as monsters, demons or devils.

Notes and References

¹ Partha Mitter, *op.cit.*, p. 164

² K J Saunders, *The Story of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 1916, pp. 117-8

³ *Ibid*, p. 70

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 119

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 85

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 84

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 85

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 86

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 66

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*, p. 68

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 64

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 72

¹⁶ J.PH.Vogel, *Buddhist Art in India, Ceylon, and Java* translated from the Dutch by A J Barnouw, Oxford, 1936, p. 67

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 68

¹⁸ G T Garratt, *The Legacy of India* Oxford, 1937, p. 89

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 78

- ²⁰ Ibid, p. 95
- ²¹ Jouveau Dubreuil, *Iconography of Southern India* translated from the French by A C Martin, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 2001 (1937), p. 128
- ²² Ibid, p. Ibid, p. 48
- ²³ Ibid, p. 60
- ²⁴ VR Ramachandra Dikshitar, *War in Ancient India* Macmillan Co. Limited, Madras, 1944, p. 146
- ²⁵ Ibid
- ²⁶ R S Sharma, *Material Milieu of Tantricism* in *Indian Society: Historical Probings* In memory of D D Kosambi ed. R S Sharma, Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi, 1984, p. 175
- ²⁷ Ibid, p. 180
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- ²⁹ R C Majundar, *Ancient India* Motilal Banarassidass Publishers Private Limited, 2013 (1952), p. 176
- ³⁰ Romila Thapar, *Early India* Penguin, Delhi, 2002, p. 276
- ³¹ Ibid, p. 277
- ³² Ibid, p. 318
- ³³ Susan L Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* Motilal Banarassidass Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 2014 (1985), p. 148
- ³⁴ Ibid