

The So Called Lajjā Gauri : An Assessment

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Numerous images, both in sculpture and painting, have often been referred to as those of Lajjā Gaurī. Several books and monographs have been published on this subject. But no scholar has tried to explain the term Lajjā Gaurī and its relevance to the type of images described or illustrated by them. It is surprising that even distinguished scholar like Stella Kramrisch has used this term without questioning its authenticity. A book written by Carol Redcliff Bolon on the subject has been reviewed by a distinguished indologist like R. Nagaswamy in the *Artibus Asia*, and he has also not raised any question about the authenticity and grammatical validity of the term Lajjā Gaurī. This is quite surprising and unexpected, although of late there has been a plethora of writing on various aspects of Indian culture where there is a distinct symptom of uninformed subversion of Indian cultural value.

The first question about the validity of the term should be on the word Gaurī, which austencibely refers to Gaurī, the wife of Śiva at the time of her marriage with the Lord. It is well known that Gaurī at that time was hardly of only five or eight years of age. That is why she has been referred to as seated on the lap of her mother Mena, the wife of Himālaya. But the images illustrated by most of the scholars show an adult girl who crossed perhaps the stage of puberty which is indicated by the prominent breasts and emphatic sexual organ of the nude form. Thus, it is very unlikely that the images have any relevance to the *Gaurī* stage of womanhood. If we take *Gaurī* in the sense of a girl with fair complexion, then also the term Lajjā Gaurī seems to be unsatisfactory. *Lajjā* means shyness, coyness or shamefulness. It is an abstract noun. Gaurī in the sense of a fair complexioned girl will be, in that case, an epithet of *Lajjā*. Then the term should be *Lajitā Gaurī*, instead of *Lajjā Gaurī*. This should be the case also if

Gaurī is taken as a proper noun. Thus the term Lajjā Gaurī raises many questions leading to utter confusion.

If Gaurī means the wife of Śiva, then also the question that comes to our mind is, why should She be ashamed or associated with any sense of coyness or shyness? Is it because of her form represented as nude? Everybody knows that nudity has never been regarded as something obscene or objectionable in Indian art. Even the so called dancing girl from Mohe-jo-Daro is represented as nude, and even, in spite of that, this image has been prized as a piece of beauty. Some scholars have, however, sneaked sexuality or eroticism in the so called images of Lajjā Gaurī. This shows their ignorance not only of the ethos of Ancient Indian art culture, but also of the Indian concept of eroticism or sexuality.

Instead of elaborating the debate on the subject, let us concentrate on the possibility of a phonetic transformation at some point of time leading to the formation of the current term Lajjā Gaurī. Those who are familiar with various unpredictable nuances of phonetic transformation and the wonders of linguistics should know that it is possible that some under-current of unnoticed transformational phenomenon might have brought about the term Lajjā Gaurī on the surface.

Every scholar who has studied the images of the so called Lajjā Gaurī has admitted that the image under reference is directly concerned with the fertility fetish of India, a country of agrarian culture. Of some of the features noticeable in these images one can single out a few which are directly connected with agriculture. For instance, in some images the hands and feet are those of a female frog (Fig.1).



Fig.1

The face mostly is substituted by a lotus or *padma* (Fig.2). The physical attributes of the images suggest direct involvement of fecundity of the fertile land commensurate with the agricultural potential of the harvesting field.

After making the above observations, I am inclined to suggest the following possibilities by virtue of which ultimately the term *Lajjā Gaurī* has come into currency:

1. It seems that the original term was *Abjā Daurī*, meaning the female frog which is an aquatic creature. It is well known that frogs are associated with the rains, an indispensable requirement of agricultural land. There is a proverb saying that when there are clouds in the sky the frogs start dancing. Thus, it is possible that the word *Abjā* has become transformed into *Lajjā*, and the word *Daurī* into *Gaurī* in oral transmission of common man.



Fig.2

2. Most likely the possibility is that the original term was *Rajjā Kaurī* or *Maurī*. The former term refers to a girl at the stage of her menstrual periodic flow, and *Kaurī* is obviously referable to *Kumārī*, that is the virgin girl. In some regional language, a virgin girl is referred to as *Maurī* instead of *Kumārī*. Even in some tribal societies, the menstrual flow of a virgin girl is planted on the land in order to increase the fertility potential of the land (Fig.3). The equation, therefore, is not unlikely, more so because in the linguistics, *Ra* and *La* are transferable alphabets. *Kaurī* can easily become *Gaurī* in oral use of the common man.
3. Another possibility is that the original term was *Adyā Kṣaunī* or *Adyā Dhaurī*, meaning the primordial goddess Earth. *Kṣaunī* is a well known epithet of the

earth because of Her making a rattling sound, particularly at the time of an earthquake. *Dhaurī* is possibly referable to the Earth as the holder (*dhāri* or *dhātri*) of everything on the surface. It is pertinent to refer to an important gold plaque repousse image of the Goddess Pṛthvī discovered from the excavations at Lauriyanandangarh, illustrated by Benjamin Rowland in his book. The image concerned shows exactly the type represented by many of the so called images referred to as those of Lajjā Gaurī. Moreover, that many of the images of Lajjā Gaurī show a lotus instead of the face. The lotus is recognised as a symbol of the Earth Goddess, as



Fig.3

mentioned in the *Padmarūpa* section of the *Pratimālakṣaṇa* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara*.

4. Another possibility is that the original term was *Ajjā Kaurī*, which refers to an important ritual performed in Indian domestic festivals symbolic of the increase or growth (*vṛiddhi*) in the family prosperity, including that of the agricultural bounty. *Ajjā* means clarified butter or *Ghee* which is poured on a lump of cow dung pasted on the wall of the house, and a few *cawrī* shells of odd number are fixed on the paste. This ritual is performed for pleasing the departed souls of the ancestors (*uparicara*) so that their blessings are available for all sorts of growth and prosperity, including those of agriculture.

Many other possibilities can be suggested in correspondence with the type of images of Lajjā Gaurī and the relevance of the interpretation to the fertility fetish

connected with the agricultural ethos of Indian culture. But, it should be noted that in no way the images of Lajjā Gaurī and their relevance to the fertility of the land should be interpreted as erotic or sexual. It is unfortunate that many scholars have written large glossy coffee-table type books highlighting the aspect of eroticism of this type of images. This is done obviously not only due to their ignorance of Indian cultural ethos, but also to cater to the foreign clientele of sophisticated pornographic enjoyment. It is high time that this should be avoided. Needless to say that this attitude is nothing but cultural terrorism which is equally dangerous like its militant counterpart.

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Comments on the paper as per discussion with Prof. Maruti Nandan Prasad Tiwari

The present probing research paper of Dr. Tirthankar Bhattacharya is both interesting and absorbing. He has rightly pointed out that images referred to as Lajjā Gaurī by earlier scholars need fresh analysis and interpretation. No known text does mention the term Lajjā Gaurī. Therefore, it remains a matter of conjecture and same has been done in the present paper. Till date,

no definite term for identification of such nude female figure sitting in typical squatted posture with lotus head and lotuses in hand is known. Another possible identification of such images could be the **Great Earth Mother (Bhūmātā)**, which is the cause of existence of every living being of the Earth.

It is interesting to note that one meaning of Gaurī is Pṛthvī as per Sanskrit Hindi Koṣa of Vaman Shivram Apte. Virtually it is the symbolic and suggestive representation of fertility fetish to be identified more cogently as **Bhūmātā**. Incidentally, lotus is associated with Sūrya who was and even today is worshipped as a deity for begetting baby. On the most splendid two Sūrya temples of Moḍherā and Koṇārḱ, I have come across such figures wherein female figures with human head is shown in the identical squatted posture with a baby coming out of her generative organ. Thus, lotus is contextual in such examples. Therefore, another plausible possibility is that the so-called **Lajjā Gaurī** figures may be termed as **Bhūmātā**, emphasizing the power and importance of procreation.

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