



Iconic Representations of Dreadful Deities: Some Masterpieces from the Collection of CSMVS

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Abstract: *There are both good and bad energies in the world. To protect the righteous from the evil energies, deities take various forms. Dreadful deities like Bhairava or Kali send chills down the spines of the evil but bless the virtuous. A multitude of images of such grotesque and fearsome divinities sprang up during medieval era. There are multiple reasons for the practice of left-handed kind of worship of these deities by conducting esoteric rituals. One of the reasons was the constant struggle for power and resources as the warlike kingdoms of medieval India were engaged in. Not only royalty but different strata of society were more or less indulged in the achievement of occult powers or siddhis. The assimilation of tribal form of worship with the main stream might be another reason. Due to these and various other reasons myriad of such images were created and at present can be seen in the temples and museums alike. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya also has fair share of images of dreadful divinities rendered with exotic aesthetical taste and are fine examples of regional variation. Amongst them are some remarkable icons of deities like Bhairava, Kshetrapala, Chamunda, Varahi, Yogini. Some of them are discussed here in detail.*

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1. Bhairava

Bhairava is a fierce manifestation of Shiva. In one of the legends revealing sectarian rivalry, Shiva created Bhairava to annihilate ego of Brahma, the Creator god. By cutting off Brahma's fifth head, Shiva committed *Brahmahatya* (brahminicide), he sent forth Bhairava and asked him to hold Brahma's severed head and told him to observe 'Mahavrata' for expiation from this great sin. He told him to get alms from everywhere with a skull in his hand. Bhairava is regarded as protector deity of settlements and temples especially Shiva temples. He is also venerated as *grama devata*. Kala Bhairava is a leader of eight main bhairavas. They have total 64 Bhairavas under them. Each Bhairava has one of the 64 Yogini as his consort.

Mahavratin Shaiva Kapalikas seems to have their prototype in Bhairava. They lived in forests, wearing animal skins and carrying skulls.

L82.2/64

Bhairava, Hoysala, Karnataka, 12th century CE

Too much ornamentation is the first impression when one looks at this sculpture of Bhairava (Fig. 1). It can be described as a typical example of Hoysala sculpture. His body is profusely decorated with ornaments of precious gems and pearl strands (tassels).

His strong face with full cheeks is characterized with almond-shaped eyes under highly arched eyebrows, vertical third eye in the centre of the forehead and straight nose. Fangs projected from his parted lips and bulging chin makes his angry countenance just right. His forehead is encircled with curls of hair except in the centre, emerging from his highly ornate *karanda mukuta*. Heavy circular earrings adorn his ears. There is *kanthi* around his head. He also wears other multi-stranded necklaces short and long both. There is ornament around his chest (a type of *udarabandha*) and a broad waistband can be seen encircling his waist. A hooded cobra encompasses his legs below the knee. Bhairava is also wearing heavy anklets and nupura. His shoulder ornaments, armlets, bracelets, finger-rings are also remarkably shown. All his ornaments are heavy and highly decorative. Two strands of sash can be seen, one on each side of otherwise fully naked body.

He holds *shula* (trident) and *damaru* (kettle drum) in right and left upper hands respectively *khadga* (sword) in lower right and *kapal patra* (skull cup) and *naramunda* in lower left hand. Dog on the left side of the god is advancing to eat flesh from *munda* and a skeletal attendant is playing on gong, another emaciated attendant on right is playing on *mridanga* (drum). Their hair are fashioned in a contemporary popular a peculiar puffy-hair-style.

In contrast to all his embellishments his *parikara* looks quite simple. It is made of flat band carved with delicate floral pattern and creepers. A circular halo behind his head points towards his divine identity.

S 70

Bhairava, Karnataka, 12th century CE

The head of this graceful naked body of Bhairava (Fig. 2) is encircled by a double-line of raised hair ending in snail-patterned curls forming a halo which also marks his divinity. His hair is held firmly by a fillet and a hooded cobra that definitely is a crowning glory adorning his forehead which also has line of few lovely curls on both sides of his vertical, third eye. Other features of his fearsome face include thin but highly arched eyebrows, large, bulging eyes, small nose, an open mouth which is unable to conceal fangs emerging from both corners, protruding (but now slightly damaged) chin, large ears. His upper right hand holds trident while left hand holds *Damaru*. His principal right hand holds raised sword and principal left hand holds both *Kapalapatra* and *Naramunda*.

He is adorned with typical ornaments like beaded circular earrings, varied necklaces, *Yajnopavita*, anklets, *Nupura*, shoulder ornaments, armlets, bracelets, finger-rings. What are emphasizing his ferocity are his girdle adorned with *Ghantikas* (small bells) and a very long *Naramundamala* reaching below his knees. He is also shown wearing footwear *Khadava*.

Bhairava is flanked by emaciated figures of attendants of which males are playing on drum while females are dancing. One female is holding a naked human torso on which dog is standing and drinking blood dripping from the *Naramunda* held by Bhairava. On the back side of this

grotesque scene is a highly ornate *Parikara* formed of two pillars attached with multiple arches emerging from the mouth of the *Vyali* (a mythical composite animal) having peacock plumage. They are seated on the pillars. The *vyalis* are mounted by two figures. Ashtabhairava are depicted in those arches. *Parikara* is surmounted by *Kirtimukha* emitting pearls on the head of Bhairava as if performing *Abhisheka* on his divine highness. The sculpture is one of the exquisite examples of Kalyani Chalukya style.



Fig. 1: Bhairava, Karnataka, 12th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, L 82.2/64



Fig. 2: Bhairava, Karnataka, 12th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, S 70

S 86

Bhairava, Karnataka, 12th century CE

This is another remarkable sculpture. Bhairava's face (Fig. 3) is undeniably horrendous due to the large eyes resembling gargoyles, double arched eyebrows, vertical eye in the centre and fangs projecting out of his open mouth. His hair with parting in the centre are meticulously shown though are partially visible due to string of skulls encircling his head adorned with a *Jatabhara*. A cobra coiled around his *Jatabhara* also supports his *Karanda mukuta*. The cobra hood held high in a stately manner further embellishes his demonic demeanor. In addition, his hair ending in curls are originating from his crown and are forming a short plumage on both sides of his head. The huge and thick circular earrings touch his shoulders. His naked body is adorned with few necklaces including *Sarpahara*, shoulder ornaments, armllets, bracelets, finger rings, multi-stranded *Yajnopavita*, and long *Naramundamala*

reaching below the knees. Another hooded Naga has encircled his knees. His feet are adorned with highly ornate anklets, *Nupura* and toe-rings. Highly impressive, elevated *Khadavas* protect his soles. A multi-stranded waist-band is seen around his waist and also sash of which only two ends are visible, one on each side.

He is holding trident and *Damaru* in his upper hands and sword and *Kapala* in his principal hands. His multi-tasking left hand shows the gesture of *Jnanamudra* and is also holding a *Naramunda* by hair. The *Naramunda* is depicted with a *Tilakamark* on his forehead and his painstakingly shown strands of hair ending in remarkable florid pattern. His emaciated ghoulish attendant holds a *Kapala* in her stretched right hand to collect blood dripping from the *Naramunda* while with her left hand she is holding a dog who is also trying to have his share of the treat. On the right side of the Bhairava two skeletal female figures are engrossed in their hideous dance. Their carefully parted hair combed back and gathered to form circular pattern with hair strands raised high. The scorpion is carved on the centre of the *Pancharatha* pedestal. His *Parikara* is adorned with scrolls and surmounted by a large *Kirtimukha*. There is a simple halo behind his head. This well-proportioned icon of Bhairava is a remarkable specimen of Kalyani Chalukya art.



Fig. 3: Bhairava, Karnataka, 12th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, S 86

S 349

Bhairava, Karnataka, 12th century CE

Another image (Fig. 4) of Bhairava from CSMVS collection is perhaps unusual as the god is depicted seated in *Maharajaleelasana*. Bhairava's association with skulls, scorpions and serpents is beautifully blended in the iconography of this slim, graceful yet simply scary figure. The *Parikara* is decorated with creeper pattern and *Makaratorana*. It is surmounted by *Kirtimukha*. The pillars flanking image of Bhairava are stylistically akin to Kadamba style of architecture.



Fig. 4: Bhairava, Karnataka, 12th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, S 349

Bhairava's bulging eyes and two fangs projecting from slightly open mouth add to his ghastly appearance. The four-armed figure holds sword and *Narakapala* along with *Naramunda* in his principal right and left hand respectively. His upper right hand holds trident and upper left hand holds *Damaru*. His left knee rests on *Naramunda*.

Besides usual jewelry this naked figure is lavishly adorned with skulls and snakes: He is wearing ornaments like *Sarpakundala*, multiple necklaces, *Sarpa-keyura*, wristlets, *Sarpa-mekhala* and long *Naramundamala*. His curls are combed backward. A hooded cobra is depicted atop his head adorning

his peculiar hairdo. The delineation of the graceful form of the divine and its simplicity (avoidance of complicated design patterns) also connects it to Kadamba style of art.

Vrushchika (scorpion), one of the attributes of Bhairava, is carved on his pedestal.

2. Kshetrapala

Kshetrapala is a guardian deity of fields or settlements or even temples. His small shrines are located in his Kshetra which he is supposed to protect from all dangers. He is also worshipped in the form of a boulder but often his images are also found. His shrines are also found in the premises of the temples of Shiva or Chamunda (Dalal, 1920: 61). He wields a number of weapons and is sometimes accompanied by dog. He is worshipped by devotees on regular basis especially in the beginning of any ritual or celebration in that particular *Kshetra* for success. He is offered blood sacrifices.

S 147

Kshetrapala, Karnataka, 12th century CE

Face of this folk deity (Fig. 5) is characterized with large bulging, wide open eyes, skillfully chiseled nose, and fangs projecting from protruding lips. His forehead is adorned with an auspicious *Tilaka* mark. Few curls of hair are noticeable on the both sides of his forehead.

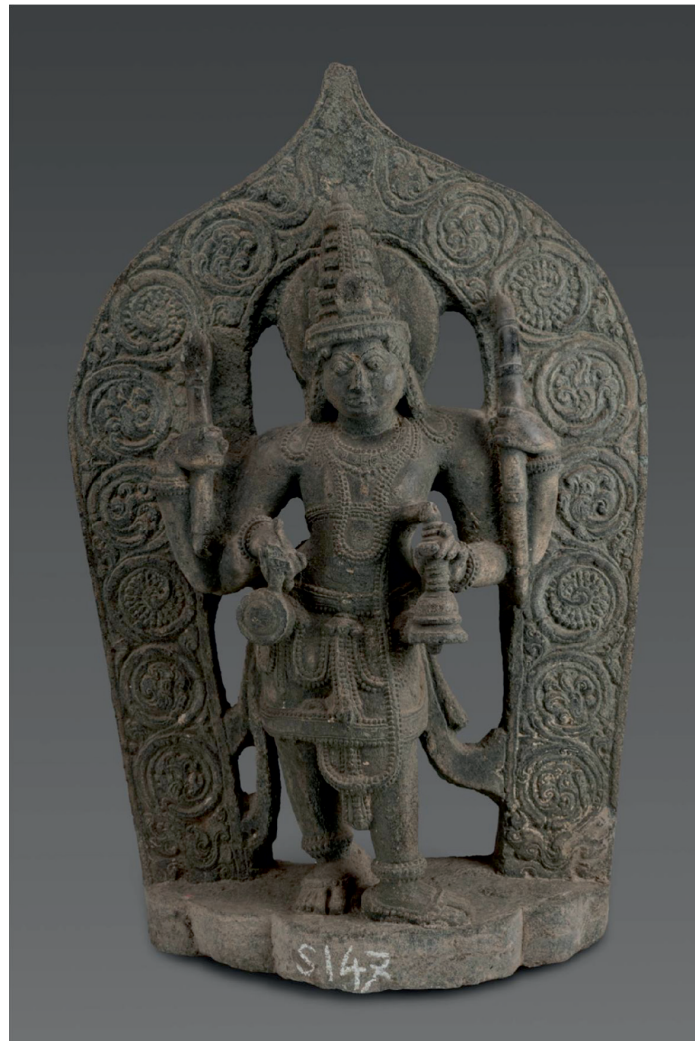


Fig. 5: Kshetrapala, Karnataka, 12th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, S 147

His persona is embellished with a tall conical *Karanda Mukuta*, large, circular earrings, beaded necklaces, a long garland reaching below his knees, shoulder ornaments, *Udarbandha*, wristlets, finger-rings, lavishly decorated *Kamarabandha* with hanging tassels of pearls, anklets and *Nupura*. Fluttering ends of sash are visible on his both sides.

This four-armed figure is holding bow and arrow in his upper hands. His left principal hand holds *Damaru* and right hand holds bell. An elaborately carved *Parikara* with scroll pattern has pointed top in coordination with conical headdress of the figure. Halo behind his head confirms his divine character.

3. Kali

Kali or Kalika- the one with dark complexion is one of the forms of Durga. As personified rage of Durga she sprang from the forehead of the supreme Goddess. She is violent- a fearful fighting figure! She symbolizes death and time. And she is the most loving mother! Mother of the Universe! She is indeed an embodiment of paradoxical qualities. She is dreadful for the demons. The divine mother has assumed this ferocious form to destroy the evil forces, to help the gods to restore cosmic order and to protect her children. She started killing demons vehemently and Lord Shiva had to intervene. He stopped her destructive rampage by lying down in her path. She calmed down when she realized that she was standing on her own consort. In her eastern Indian popular iconography (Dakshina-Kali), the great goddess is usually shown having lolling tongue, wearing skirt of human arms, a garland of human heads and standing on her consort Shiva. She is mainly worshipped with tantric rituals offering her *Madya* (liquor) and *Mamsa* (meat).



Fig. 6: Kali, Tamilnadu, 11th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, S 98.5

She is embodiment of feminine energy, creativity and fertility. As a divine mother she leads her devotees to the path of liberation. She is the chief of Dashamahavidya. Devi Mahatmya identifies Chamunda with Kali. She sucked all the blood of the demon Raktabija from whose blood drop rose another demon.

S 98.5

Kali, Tamil Nadu, 11th century CE

This Chola figure (Fig. 6) depicts Kali as a lady with slender and sensuous body but dreadful demeanor. She is Pretavahana. Her face is characterized with bulbous eyes under her bow-like highly arched eyebrows and Tilaka mark on her forehead. She has a straight nose but her nose is little bit deformed due to flared nostrils. Fangs and perhaps tongue is also protruding out of her gaping mouth. Skull is adorning her flame like headdress with hair rising upwards looking like raised hoods of the Nagas providing halo to honour her divinity. Elaborate *Mukuta* made of beaded tassels adorns her forehead.

She is wearing a multi-stranded broad necklace around her neck. Attached to it there is ornament passing in between her well-formed breasts. Her thin waist typical example of Chola mark of feminine beauty and is embellished with a girdle or *Mekhala* of skulls. Surprisingly she is wearing two different earrings. Her left earring is circular while the right one is skull shaped. She is also wearing shoulder ornaments, armllets, bangles, anklets and *Nupura*.

She is seated on high throne in *Lalitasana*. Her right foot is rested on *Padapitha* which is rested on *Preta*. Her left foot is rested on the head of the *Preta*. This eight-armed goddess holds trident, sword, *Chhurika* and *Damaru* in her right hands and perhaps *Khatvanga*, shield, *Ghantika*, *Kapala* in her left hands. She is described as Naravahana (having prostrate human body as her mount) or Pretavahana (having corpse as her mount).

4. Chamunda

Chamunda is a ferocious form of Durga. She is one of the seven Matrikas and sixty-four Yoginis. In the *Markandeya Purana*, Chamunda's origin is directly recorded: From the forehead of the Mother (Ambika, i.e., Durga), contracted with frowns, sprang forth a black goddess of fearful aspect... Round her neck was a garland of dead corpses. Dry, withered and hideous... her eyes bloodshot, she filled the quarters with her shouts (Danielou, 1964: 286).

Bedecked with ornaments of bones, skulls and serpents, she resides in cremation ground. She is offered wine and meat even human sacrifices (Lorenzen: 16,17). She is usually shown with her index finger at her mouth. This gesture is generally identified as *Vismayamudra* which doesn't make any sense in the context of iconography of Chamunda. Considering her tribal origin (Bhandarkar, 1995: 205). she seems to be whistling or ululating (ancestor of *ulu-uli*, *uluka-dhvani* or emulating the cry of an owl) by striking her tongue in rapid repetition with her index finger. It must have been a strange war cry to intimidate enemies just like it would have been done in the past by tribal groups. She can also be linked to whistling Uluka or Ulukavahini Yogini (Yogini on Owl, Kannauj, U.P., c. 11th c. CE, Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery). In remote villages of India, whistling at night is still thought to attract bad luck and evil spirits. Chamunda is also associated with an owl. *Ulukam ghora darshanam* (*Mahabharata*, 10-1-36). As a nocturnal bird an owl is associated with evil and death. Shriek or harsh hooting of an owl is considered bad omen even today. Cunningham has described six- or eight-armed figure with one pair of hands pulling wide open her mouth and her other hands holding a sword, a skull-cup and a kettle-drum,

from Ranipur-Jhari in Orissa. She can be identified as Rauravi (she who makes a loud sound), Attahasa (she who laughs loudly), Shivarava (she with the voice of a jackal) or Haharava (she who utters loud sounds) (Dehejia: 106). It can be noted that the manners and etiquettes such images are associated with are beyond the norms of the sophistication in the society. These manners clearly discern wild, tribal origin of these deities.

S 430

Dancing Chamunda, Gujarat, 11th century CE

In Soddhala's '*Udayasundarikatha*' (11th century CE) one of the characters, Kumarakesari praises goddess Chamunda, as wearing the bracelets of snakes and holding a big trident in her hand. Her body is covered with a long garment densely woven by means of human heads. Even Indra is said to be bowing down to her feet (Dalal: 61).

Faithful to her descriptions in the texts, this (Fig. 7) emaciated, grotesque figure with shrivelled and sagging breasts, shrunken belly, bulging eyes adorns herself with ornaments made of snakes, bones and skulls. A long *Mundamala* is a part of her embellishments. Her piled matted hair is clasped by snakes and skulls. She is portrayed as symbolic representation of old age, disease and destruction.



Fig. 7: Dancing Chamunda, Gujarat, c. 11th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, S 430

Her principal right hand holds owl-hilted *Chhurika* and principal left hand is holding index finger to her lips. Her additional right hand holds trident and left hand holds *Narakapala*. Owl topped *Khatvanga* is held in her left elbow-pit. She is Naravahana. Her male attendants hold skull bowls. They are engrossed in the gruesome act of feasting on the *Preta*. Image of Chamunda is a stark contrast to our sense of decorum and aesthetics. In awe and fear, devotees pray to her for protection from all evils. Her plain *Parikara* is designed with creeper pattern. The whole composition is very symmetrical but appears ghastly. On stylistic ground it can be attributed to Solanki period.

5. Yogini

The cult of independent and horrific goddesses has been powerful in India for many centuries. Yogini is ensemble of female deities mainly worshipped with esoteric Tantric rites, arranged in auspicious number of images, eight or multiples of eight like sixty-four. They are seen in both benevolent and malevolent forms and need pacification. If worshipped properly they grant *Siddhis* to their devotees. Specific architectural forms were devised for enshrining them. There are circular open air temples at Hirapur, Ranipur-Jharial, Odisha and Bheraghat, MP, Coimbatore in South India and rectangular shrine near Kandariya Mahadeva temple, MP.

L 82.2/87

Yogini, Rajasthan, 10th century CE

This elegant at the same time dreadful figure with unorthodox behavior (Fig. 8) is wearing a jewelled *Jatamukuta* (piled matted hair), *Karnakundalas*, beaded necklace reaching her deep navel and beaded bangles. Her *Kamarabandha* holding lower garment has a beautiful beaded tassel hanging between her legs. She is also wearing a long and thick *Vanamala* reaching below the knees and *Nupura*. Her skillfully chiseled face with delicate Pratihara features reveals enigmatic smile. Her attractive appearance would never let her to be enlisted as fearsome deity but her attributes reflect her dreadful disposition. She also has tiny fangs protruding from her otherwise sensuous lips.

This four-armed deity is *Pretavahana*, standing on a corpse. Her upper right hand holds trident, and upper left hand most probably holds *Khatvanga* of which only staff is extant. Her principal right hand is in *Abhaya* and also holds *Akshamala* and its counterpart on left is holding a *Naramunda*. She is the largest figure in the composition. The hieratic scale clarifies her superior position vis-a-vis her entourage, whose presence adds to her status. Her well-ornamented female attendant is holding *Chhurika* in her right hand and a *Narakapala* in her left hand. It seems soon she will be feasting on the dead body. Eating flesh off the corpse was a part of esoteric rites. On the left side of the goddess there is male attendant forcing chisel in the mouth of the dead body using human skull as a hammer. The *Preta* is though lying on the ground has his face upwards with head rested on the palm of his right hand. Her simple *Parikara* has delicate lotus



Fig. 8: Yogini, Rajasthan, 10th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, L 82.2/ 87

pattern working as halo for the image. The overall rendering of this beautiful goddess is faithful to Pratihara idiom.

It seems to have some association with *Shava Sadhana* ritual. The Shri Matottara Tantra gives us details of *Shava-* Sadhana which is to be performed in front of Bhairava, at the centre of the Mothers (*Matrumadhyagam*) (Dehejia, 1986: 58,59). The Matottara concludes with the statement that Mothers watch the ritual from the sky, and that the best of *Sadhakas* will obtain the eight magical *Siddhis* by the performance of these rites (Dehejia: 59).

78.82

Yogini, South India, 9th -10th century CE

This goddess is identified as a yogini (Fig. 9) due to her appearance which is remarkably fearsome. Her lovely, slender body is having third eye on the forehead. Her round face has large eyes, nose with flared nostrils and mouth with fangs. Her hair forms halo behind her head. She is wearing a tiara



Fig. 9: Yogini, South India, c. 9th -10th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, 78. 82

and her hair has hornlike features. She has two different earrings one of which on her left is circular another looks like a dangling human corpse. She is adorned with *Sarpahara*, *Yajnopavita* of skulls and *Sarpodarabandha*. She is scantily dressed. This four-armed deity holds fish and a wine cup in her upper right and left hands respectively. Her principal right hand is raised and is holding a human corpse by its legs while her left hand rests on her lap. Holding a human corpse may suggest the *Shava Sadhana* rites (Dehejia: 58,59).

The *Matottara Tantra* describes Yoginis as *madiranandaghurnita* (one swaying with the effect of wine), *madiranandalalsa* or *madiranandanandita* (one delighting in the pleasure of wine). The *Brihaddharma Purana* describes Yoginis as dancing while drinking blood and wine. The *Kaulavali Nirnaya* specifies importance of blood and meat in the worship of Yoginis and Bhairava (Dehejia:57).

Matsyendranatha's *Kaulajnananirnaya Tantra*, enumerates yoginis like Narabhajini (eater of man), Mundadharini (she who holds a severed head) and in other sources, Shava-hasta (she who holds corpse in her hand), Pretabhushini (adorned with corpses) (Tiwari, 2001:201). It appears that actual sacrifice of humans was not part of the Yogini cult. Propitiation of the Yoginis seems rather to have included the rituals connected with corpses, and tantric works dealing with such *Shava Sadhana*, including the *Kaulavali Nirnaya* specifically mention the necessity of making offerings to the sixty-four Yoginis while conducting these esoteric rites. According to *Vira Tantra*, *Shava Sadhana* is to be performed in the *Smashana* or burning grounds. It clearly states that in the course of corpse rites, libations of wine and oblations of food are to be offered to the 64 Yoginis (Dehejia, : 57).

This early Chola Yogini doesn't just reveal superior quality of workmanship but she is significant in terms of studying cult practices. She is seated in *Lalitasana* on a *Vishvapadma* (double lotus asana). Her overall appearance is dreadful in spite of her graceful figure.

6. Varahi

She is a *Shakti* or female aspect of Varaha incarnation of Vishnu. Her mounts are lion or buffalo. Varahi, with other Matrikas was created by the Supreme Goddess, Durga when she fought against demon Raktabija. She is usually depicted as sow-faced woman. As enumerated in the list of sixty-four yoginis, she is worshipped with tantric rituals by Hindus and Vajrayana Buddhists. *Varahi tantra* or *Vajra-Varahi tantra* was learnt by many of the eighty-four Siddhas and they mastered the occult powers or *siddhis*.

S 328

Varahi, Madhya Pradesh, 9th -10th century CE

This sow-faced goddess (Fig. 10) has plain, circular halo behind her head. Her graceful female body reveals delicate contours. She has her head raised upwards with neatly combed hair falling on her side. Her small ears are aligned perfectly above both sides of her forehead. Her fangs confirm her identity. Her mount buffalo is standing backside. Of her ornaments, necklaces and anklets are visible. Below her waist, she is draped in long lower garment with sash tied around her waist.

Her right hand holds mace and left hand supports child seated on her waist. Rendering of her mount is fairly naturalistic. Her unnatural size in comparison to her mount emphasizes her social status through hieratic scale. A motherly image of this goddess may not be that harsh and horrid compared to figures of Chamunda but just imagine boar faced lady with projected tusks approaching you!

S 74.2

Varahi, South India 10th century CE

This sow-faced goddess (Fig. 11) has typical early Chola female body revealing her delicate contours of the body in the hard granite rock. She is wearing conical *Jatamukuta*. Her small ears are aligned perfectly above both sides of her forehead. Her fangs shown above her mouth confirms her identity. She is seated in *Lalitasana* on *Vishvapadma* (double lotus). She is wearing a necklace, *Yajnopavita*, armband, bangles and *Nupura*. Below her waist, she is draped in long dhoti. *Mrigajina* (deer-skin) covers her waist.



Fig. 10: Varahi, Madhya Pradesh, c. 9th-10th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, S 74.2



Fig. 11: Varahi, South India c. 10th century CE, Coll: CSMVS,

Her upper right hand holds sword and upper left hand holds noose. Lower right hand is in *Abhayamudra* and lower left-hand rests on her lap.

L 87.6

Varahi, Gujarat, C. 10th century CE

This female deity with head of Varaha (Fig. 12) is depicted in dancing posture. Her principal right hand holds a sword and her principal left hand holds Patra. Her additional right hand is in *Varada* and left hand holds *Ghantika*.

The smooth textures of her body are offset by contrasting fine line in the hair. She is wearing a conical hairstyle. It is embellished with floral pattern in the centre and seems studded with gems. She is wearing a necklace a part of which is dangling in between her breasts and ultimately reaches her waist. She also wears armlets, bangles, *Nupura* and a snake around her waist that is used as *Kamarabandha*. Two animals standing, each on her either side, accompany her. They are facing opposite directions.



Fig. 12: Varahi, Gujarat, c. 10th century CE, Coll: CSMVS, L 87.6

These dreadful deities have definite connection with macabre, esoteric practices of Kaula, Shaiva and Vajrayana Buddhist tantrics on one hand and of tribals on the other. *Abhicharaka* rituals were also popular among royals. Not only rulers but others were also involved with worship of such deities and to propitiate them as well as to obtain certain boons even animal and human sacrifices were offered to them. Indian literature, right from the Harsha's times, have ample references to such esoteric practices. Bana's *Kadambari* mentions tantric rituals performed by *Shabara* tribesmen in the temple of Chandika (Lorenzen:13). In *Kadambari* Queen Vilasvati followed certain tantric rituals for acquiring son. *Harshacharita* also refers to sacrificing human flesh to propitiate *ugra* devatas like Chandika, Vetala, Mahakala. Sale of human flesh to cremation ground demons is also mentioned in *Malati-Madhava*,

Kathasaritsagara and other Sanskrit works (Lorenzen: 17). The tantrics who had mastered occult powers influenced society on a large scale.

The Kāpālikas (skull bearers) were notorious for their extreme practices, including meat-eating, intoxication, ritual orgies, and in some cases cannibalism. They were devotees of Bhairava, Chamunda and alike (the worship of Varahi also includes tantric Shakta and Shaiva elements as she is also one of the 64 yoginis and believed to be consort of Unmatta Bhairava). Most of the religious rituals of the followers of tantricism were centred around such dreadful deities. Bhairava was considered by Kapalikas to be the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world, and king of the gods. This deity was also propitiated by human or animal sacrifice. Along with human head, blood, wine was offered to these deities. In *Malati-Madhava* (act 5th) a cremation ground is described where Aghoraghanta and Kapalakundala paid obeisance to Chamunda and started dancing their ritual dance before they attempted to offer Malati as a sacrifice to Chamunda. In *Prabodhachandrodaya* Kapalika invoked Bhairava before offering human sacrifice (Lorenzen:85). In *Rajatarangini*, Kalhana informs that King Avantivarman's minister Shura performed human sacrifice of the *damara* chief in front of Bhairava (Torzsok 2015: 7)

The Kapalikas were also associated with *Mahavrata* or Great vow. It was actually a punishment for the murder of a Brahmin. According to *Vishnu-smruti*, the murderer should live in a forest hut, take bath three times a day, beg for alms carrying the skull of the person who was killed, sleep on grass and wear animal skin all for a term of 12 years. Bhairava seems to be prototypical Kapalika, who is described as having lived in forests, wearing animal skins and carrying skulls. The Kapalikas would accumulate much religious merit and subsequently magical power from their great penance. Their rites and tenets conform quite closely to several prescriptions found in the *Brahmayāmala*, which is an early (6th to 8th century) Shakta text commonly listed among *Bhairavatantras* (Hatley, 2007, 84-94). Unlike in other Shakta tantras, the *Brahmayāmala*'s two main deities involve *Kapaali* or *Kaapaali* in their names: the male is called Kapaalishabhairava, and his consort is Chanda Kaapaalini. The *Mahavrata* figures prominently in some contexts. It must be performed as a preliminary to some cremation-ground practices (*BrY.* 46.2-3; 47.3; 48.10) and is described as the most powerful of the preliminary observances called *Vidyavratas* (*BrY.* 21.108-109). The text gives us the following definition of the *mahavratin*'s appearance:

The practitioner must cover his body with ashes and wear a crown of his twisted hair. The top of his head bears the crescent moon and is decorated with (a diadem of) skulls (incised on bone). He wears jewels made of pieces of human bones in his ears, on his head, and on his arms. His sacred thread is made of human hair and a (similar?) girdle decorates his hips. He must put on a necklace and place a (bone ornament?) on his hair-tuft. His staff has a trident and a human skull on it, with decorations made of human hair. He should play the *Damaru* drum or a kettle-drum. He must also have a bell and put a garland of bells on his girdle. He should wear jingling jewels on his feet as well as on his hands and fingers. He has a heavenly armlet on the upper arm and must draw an eye on his forehead. He must emit a jackal's cry. (*BrY* 21.102-107; trans. by author) (Törzsök 2012: 6). Kalhana, in *Rajatarangini*, mentions deity Shatakapalessa and a circle of goddesses. A human sacrifice was offered to these deities by Yogini Bhatta to acquire supernatural powers (Torzsok: 4,5). Igatpuri copper plate inscription of Pulikeshi II Chalukya refers to Kapaleshvara Shiva and the *Mahavratins*.

The aim of the Kapalika rituals was to come into a mystical identification with Shiva. Self-sacrifice was also held at a premium for the Kapalikas, who allegedly inflicted mutilations and other physical penances upon their bodies, including self-immolation, in some instances. *Harshacharita* also refers to burning of guggul on one's body (Lorenzen: 17). Somadeva's *Yashastilaka* (959 CE) mentions

Mahavratin heroes who sell human flesh cut from their own bodies (Lorenzen: 17). This allegedly allowed the practitioner magical powers on the worldly plane and liberation from reincarnation on the soteriological plane. For all the tantric worshippers, *Moksha* was fittingly described as an eternity of ceaseless sexual bliss (Lorenzen: 17).

The quest for power seems to have led to the worship of Yoginis. The Yoginis are mostly shown either in dancing pose or seated in *Lalitasana* with one leg resting on the ground and the other folded at the knee and placed upon their *vahana*. *Kalarnava Tantra* indicates that royal worship of 64 Yoginis was of significance. Shiva expounds thus: "If a king worship 64 Yoginis with total devotion. O Devi, his fame will reach the shores of the 4 oceans, of that there is no doubt." Texts on *Yogini sadhana* specify that Yogini worshipped as wife will make a man the foremost among kings (Dehejia: 85). *Skanda Purana* also promises royal worshipper of the Yoginis great wealth and victory in all disputes. The pursuit of occult powers reached at the highest peak during medieval ages. *Uddisha Tantra* gives instructions and Mantras for *Maranam* (killing of enemies), *Mohanam* (bewildering, deluding the enemy), *stambhanam* (paralysis, stoppage of fire, mind, army), *Vidveshanam* (causing enmity), *ucchatanam* (causing a man to flee), *vashikaranam* (subjugation of king, woman), *akarshanam* (attraction), 9th chapter is devoted to Yakshini worship and *Shava smashana sadhana* and there are mantras for bringing dead body to life. The last chapter contains mantras for warding off evils (Dehejia: 85). Kalhana (4.114) states that from his time onwards, kings employed witchcraft and similar practices against the elders when they desired kingship (Torzsok:11) Kalhana also states that king Ranaditya attained '*Patalasiddhi*' by the favour of goddess Bhramaravasini who in the form of princess Ranarambha helped him to descend to the underworld and enjoy there for many years (Torzsok: 10).

Along with tantrics, the mainstream Shaivite cults as well as Mahasiddhas and Natha Siddhas also gave impetus to the worship of these *ugra devatas* as a result of which multitude of sculptures in different sculptural styles were produced in the length and breadth of the country, during medieval period.

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