

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE NIGHT
Living mothers and divine daughters at an Orissan goddess festival

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the nocturnal processions at Thakurani Jatra, a biennial Hindu festival in southern Orissa (India). The festival takes place in honour of the goddess Budhi Thakurani and signifies her visit to her natal home, symbolised by the transfer of the deity to a temporary shrine. The important ceremonies of this festival take place during the night and require the participation of women in public processions. While most of their roles are confined to a few selected members of the community, each and every female devotee might join the final procession of the festival and proceed through the streets of the town as a representative of the goddess herself. In 2001 about ten thousand women gathered, followed by another, even larger crowd of male spectators.¹

There have been several studies reflecting on time concepts within Indian culture. They focus on the idea of cyclical rather than linear time, on the different lunar and solar calendars and their inter-related religious significance, as well as on astrologically defined auspicious moments and periods.² They also stress the performance of Hindu festivals as time markers. However, the fact that many of these events take place at night has not yet been analysed. The aim of this paper is therefore to evaluate the above mentioned goddess festival and discover what it is that makes the night more apt for religious celebrations. To what degree does it matter that the main rituals take place only after sunset? Or, to put it the other way around, how is the idea of the night perpetuated by people performing certain actions preferably during the dark part of the day? The main focus will be on the female primacy during the night that contrasts with the general absence of women not only in nocturnal life, but also in the performance of public rituals. It will be shown that both features are related to the 'dark' quality of Thakurani, who 'travels through the night' (*nisachara*) and thus is very accessible to her devotees at that time.

¹ The analysis is based on participant observation and narrative interviews with reference to Thakurani Jatra carried out in 2001. The fieldwork was part of a long-term research on women's cultural performances in Orissa (1999, 2000, 2000–2001, 2003). Oral accounts, videos and other documents served to compare the data with previous and following performances.

² On the ritual renewal of time at Hindu festivals, see Marglin (1985) and Östör (1980). For cosmological concepts and calendrical features see Fuller (1992:263–266) and Michaels (1998:326–346).

THE FESTIVAL

Thakurani Jatra is the main religious event in southern Orissa. It is celebrated in honour of Budhi Thakurani, the patron goddess of Berhampur, the commercial centre of Ganjam District. Its tradition is linked with the hybrid Oriya and Telugu culture in this region, which largely resulted from the migration of Telugu weavers from Andhra to the local Mahuri kingdom in the eighteenth century.³ Their economic success finally led to the rise of Berhampur as a 'silk city' and was attributed to the village goddess of the place. Thus, it is the hereditary headman of the Telugu weaver community (Oriya: Dera, Telugu: Devangi) who directs the performance of the festival. According to a legend (*katha*) he was so pious and virtuous that he became the adopted father of the goddess. His biennial invitation to Thakurani to visit her 'natal' place is celebrated with great pomp and splendour. In recent years this festival lasted for about three weeks in around April and included not only an elaborate set of rituals, but also entertainment, decorative constructions and a large fair. It attracted more than a hundred thousand devotees until Thakurani finally returned to her main temple, i.e. to her 'in-laws', who belong to the Oriya barber caste (Bhandari).⁴

At first glance, Thakurani Jatra represents what Fuller (1992:131–142) has classified as a 'south Indian temple festival', that is, the collective celebration of a village deity, usually a goddess, which takes place during the hot season and lasts for several days.⁵ Its ritual tasks are shared systematically among different communities, with an emphasis being given to the dominant caste. Thus it serves as the principal event for the residents to identify themselves with the region that is protected and ruled by the goddess. However, with respect to Thakurani Jatra there is one more striking division of ritual labour, which is based on gender. While the headman of the weavers, the Desibehera, is responsible for the financial and administrative management of the festival, he does not have any religious function. Besides the different kinds of male priests and ritual specialists involved in the conduct of Thakurani Jatra, the major rituals are performed with the help of Dera women and, most importantly, the Desibeherani (i.e. the Desibehera's wife). While pot processions resembling the feminine divine force (*sakti*) are well known throughout most of India, the particular role of

³ Oriya and Telugu are two Indian languages, the former Indo-Aryan, the latter Dravidian. As such their difference does not only represent people from two neighbouring states in the Indian nation (Orissa and Andhra Pradesh), but also symbolises the contrast of the North and South Indian heritages.

⁴ Thakurani Jatra is hardly recognised in the academic literature on Orissa. While a few authors mention its name and place (e.g. Rath 1987:110), it is only a recent District Gazetteer that gives a brief (English) summary (Behuria 1995:243–245). In Oriya, local newspapers offer supplements on the Thakurani Jatra, and an illustrative booklet on the festival is available in the bazaar (Patra 1997). None of these sources critically considers the social and religious practice of Thakurani Jatra.

⁵ For ethnographic accounts of similar goddess festivals in Andhra, see Handelman (1995) and Tapper (1979). For an earlier account, see Elmore (1915)

weavers in the conduct of nocturnal processions and the emphasis on female specialists seemingly also characterise the worship of the goddess Chandi that is associated with Orissa and its northern neighbour Bengal.⁶

The female bias of the festival is not limited to the Dera community but extends to the much broader level of the locality. Through worship performed by women, a family maintains ritual relationships with Budhi Thakurani as the patroness of the town. Let us therefore consider the religious significance of women and examine more closely the nocturnal processions as well as the 'return journey' of the goddess.

DIVINE DAUGHTERS ROAMING AROUND

Whereas in the day-time men as well as women from different areas, age groups and social backgrounds come to the festival ground, buy some offerings and worship Thakurani, the goddess herself leaves the temporary shrine every evening in order to visit her devotees. Nine sacred pots, representing Thakurani and her 'eight sisters', are taken around in a procession through the streets of the old part of Berhampur. This divine movement (*jatra*) is the central feature of the festival and therefore synonymous with this event and its entertaining aspects. To carry one of these pots is a matter of high prestige. While the Desibeherani heads the procession with the main goddess pot (see figure), she is followed by eight selected Dera women who carry the remaining eight pots on their heads. Accompanied by masked dancers, drummers, ceremonial items and priestly attendants, they walk barefoot, as on other ritual occasions, on an endless carpet of red and black saris, presented by devotees and spread on the ground by low-caste assistants. First they pass the residence of the Mahuri *raja*, a descendant of the local dynasty, who comes to visit Berhampur for its goddess festival. At his house, a Bhandari priest worships Thakurani on behalf of the (former) royal family. Afterwards, the sacred pots proceed for about three hours through a few pre-selected streets. The route changes every night, gradually outlining the ritual geography of the divine natal village. The procession is not allowed to pass the invisible border between the territories of Thakurani's father and her in-laws, that is, to enter the lanes close to the main goddess temple. After about twenty days all known quarters of the weavers, or in present-day parlance all the '72 streets' should be covered so that each neighbourhood has a chance to receive the divine guest.

⁶ Manna (1993:157–159) has described these features at a Bengali festival in honour of the goddess Chandi (Birbhum District). See also McDaniel (2003:7–10), who discussed the worship of goddesses in the form of an old woman, similar to that of Budhi (lit. old) Thakurani of Berhampur. With reference to Andhra, however, Handelman (1995:288–291) had noticed the crucial role of weavers in the conduct of a (male-dominated) goddess festival.



The divine power of Budhi Thakurani has been ritually transferred into a highly decorated pot, carried by the Desibeherani in nocturnal processions (photo: Beatrix Hauser).

When Thakurani visits a street, it is almost exclusively women who worship her on behalf of their families. After fasting for the whole day, they will pray to the goddess in the main pot and wash the feet of the Desibeherani with turmeric water. In many streets female devotees need to queue up in order to do this. Besides, they place their infants on the floor to make the goddess step over them (in her embodied manifestation). This is considered a divine blessing. Thus, the social relations in the street are enhanced by the shared ritual performance of the women. During Thakurani Jatra the goddess, who in her temple is worshipped by her devotees as a mother, becomes a beloved daughter returning to her place of birth.⁷ While, according to the hegemonic discourse, Thakurani visits her pious father, women associate her presence with the freedom of a girl's childhood days. She need not fulfil the expectations of her

in-laws, like staying inside, veiling, showing obedience and working hard, but instead may just 'roam around' the streets. In other words, Thakurani's shift from the Bhandari's to the Desibehera's care reflects the contrasting code of conduct experienced by Hindu women between her marital and her natal homes. The same loving care that a home-coming daughter receives from her parents, brothers and other relatives is also shown to Thakurani, who is welcomed as just another close family member. As in the divine visit, married daughters living outside Berhampur also take the opportunity to visit their family during Thakurani Jatra.

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The idea of a married woman leaving for a visit to her natal home is also central to the Durga Puja celebration in West Bengal, and refers to the temporary movement of women and the goddess alike (Östör 1991:21). For Thakurani's recognition as a 'Daughter Goddess', see also Schnepel (2002:237).

LIVING MOTHERS TRAVELLING THROUGH THE NIGHT

In the final night of Thakurani Jatra, the festival culminates in the 'return journey' (*bahuda jatra*) of the goddess. The celebrations, continuing throughout the night (and broadcast by the local TV station), invite thousands of devotees, who in their excitement not only visit the main ritual sites but wander around the illuminated streets of the old town, which have been decorated for this purpose by the various neighbourhoods. Arrangements showing divine heroes and mythological scenes attract special attention, while food stalls, theatres, costumed people and comedy contribute further to the festive spirit.⁸ On the ritual level, two events occur at the same time: the public journey of Thakurani and her eight sisters, personified by the nine sacred pots; and, in almost every household, the private worship of the goddess pots, which are finally taken to join the main procession to the Thakurani temple. In the afternoon, priests of the Damala caste (Telugu temple servants who blow the conch) initiate both activities with the preparation of a thousand-eyed pot in the Desibehera's house. This perforated ('eyes') pot symbolises the gifts a wife usually brings back home from a visit to her parents. After midnight, the nine pots at the temporary shrine receive their final worship and are removed. Guided by the thousand-eyed pot, the procession heads for Thakurani's in-laws. This time the procession is particularly gorgeous and includes a variety of musicians and decorative elements. It is followed by dignitaries of the town dressed up as the king, minister and Dera chief, as well as by (male) devotees playfully throwing coloured powders at each other and dancing in the street. Since the old town is already packed with people, the procession takes hours to reach the temple.

During this final night, the female emphasis is less on the main procession than on the private worship of Thakurani and her escort back home. Women of almost every household will already have instructed a Bhandari priest to 'install' their own sacred pot in the morning. As soon as the thousand-eyed pot has been prepared at the main festival site, women all over the town start to worship their respective goddess pots at home, usually in the company of their female relatives and friends, so that some families keep not only two or three but more than twenty sacred pots. The installation of each pot is based on a wish (*manasika*) for a boon from the goddess and implies the obligation to carry it to the Thakurani temple during the following night.⁹ Whoever has made such a promise will also be fasting. The privately conducted rituals resemble a kind of condensed version of the *jatra*. From about 1 a.m. onwards women join the public procession, which gradually attracts up to ten thousand pot carriers until sunrise. Even though assistants guide the masses to form groups and to proceed forward little by little, it is almost 5 a.m. when the first pot carriers reach the temple. During

⁸ On the comedy of costumed people, see Hauser (n.d.).

⁹ There are also a very few men who commit themselves to carrying such a pot, though this is exceptional. In the 2001 *jatra*, about five percent of the pot carriers were men.

this procession many of the women not only reach their physical limits, but also become possessed by the goddess. The carrier of a sacred pot thus turns into the goddess' own vessel. From the individual devotee's perspective, this embodiment of the female divine power is a highly religious experience. Once the women arrive at the temple entrance, they smash their pots. Many of them need to recover and lie down. The remaining symptoms of possession are removed by sprinkling water on them in order to 'cool' the goddess.¹⁰

With regard to the rhythm of time at Thakurani Jatra, we may summarily distinguish three ritual periods: (1) during the day, the goddess is worshipped in her temporary shrine, devotees (regardless of gender) bring offerings, and priests conduct the rituals; (2) during the first half of the night, Thakurani roams around the streets, and local women honour her like a village daughter; (3) after midnight, which is the proper time for the goddess to travel from one place to another, women do not worship Thakurani in a strict sense but rather represent her, and sometimes even physically embody her. It is this ritual significance that requires and legitimises the presence of women in the nocturnal public. Thus, the efficient conduct of the festival – which after all guarantees the prosperity and well-being of the locality by the grace of the goddess – is based on women and their religious roles. They link the patron goddess with her territory as either ritual intermediaries or divine representatives. Moreover, since the washing of feet with turmeric water and the worship of sacred pots belong to the ritual repertoire of women, they feel encouraged in their gender-specific religious practices. However, it is men and male ritual specialists who govern the public discourse of the *jatra*.

THE DARKNESS OF THE GODDESS

There are certainly many advantages involved in celebrating a festival during the night. First of all, most people are free from work, and secondly it provides a contrast with the daily routine and thus transforms any action into an exceptional event. Indeed, all over India there are certain festivities that take place preferably during the night, such as ritual dramas, folk 'operas', musical performances or religious ceremonies. With respect to Thakurani Jatra, the choice of time is neither accidental nor solely practical. The goddess is clearly associated with 'nocturnal qualities' and therefore worshipped preferably late at night.

¹⁰ In southern Orissa, possession by a goddess serves as a common religious idiom, often but not exclusively embodied by women. I have analysed this form of divine communication elsewhere (see Hauser 2004a). It underlines the necessity to reconsider the anthropological literature on gender and possession because of its tendency to essentialise women as purely passive victims, at least with reference to South Asia (Hauser 2003).

In Orissa, people know a great number of rather fierce goddesses, who are worshipped for their extraordinary power and at the same time feared for their anger, which might cause disease, epidemics and natural disasters. These goddesses are usually identified by their generic term 'thakurani' (Mistress, Our Lady) and might be identified with well-known Hindu goddesses like Bhairabi, Chandi or Kali. In the course of time, some of them achieve the status of a village deity and come to be known by a specific name and cult, like Budhi Thakurani (Old Thakurani) of Berhampur. Most if not all of the *thakurani*-goddesses are known for their special relationship with the night. First of all, there are numerous semi-sacred narratives of female divinities who reveal themselves to their devotees through the darkness itself. Similarly the origin of Thakurani Jatra is explained with reference to a nightly encounter of the Desibehera with the goddess in the guise of a helpless girl.¹¹ Secondly, goddesses are known to transmit their messages through dreams and as such guide their devotees.¹² With reference to Thakurani Jatra, for instance, many pot carriers will report such a dream when asked about their active participation in the festival. Thirdly, these goddesses are understood to 'travel through the night', that is, actually to manifest themselves during darkness. It is due to this heightened presence of the goddess that the nocturnal worship is considered to provide the most appropriate access to her divinity. The efficacy of such nocturnal worship (*nisa puja*) is highest at midnight. Still, this classification might refer to any corresponding ritual performed after sunset or even during the day-time, given that it addresses a *nisa* deity.¹³

The general preference for the nocturnal worship of fierce Hindu goddesses becomes most obvious during the 'nine nights' (Navaratri), the main goddess festival celebrated all over northern India, which overlaps with regional variants like Durga Puja in Bengal. In Orissa, this festival is celebrated on a grand scale lasting from three to sixteen nights.¹⁴ The peak of this festival comes on the 'eighth' (*asthami*) day of the waxing moon in the lunar month of *asvina* (September/October), and is marked by a nocturnal animal sacrifice. Yet even apart from this festival, there is a ranking of nights concerning their ritual efficacy for the worship of a fierce goddess: devotees in Orissa prefer Tuesday nights, those in the Hindu month of *chaitra* (March/April) and those commencing with the entrance of the sun into another zodiac (*samkranti*). These features are also preferred in the case of day-time worship. Furthermore, the hierarchy of nights is governed by the absence of light. Whereas the new moon is of heightened importance for the worship of a *thakurani*, full moon is usually avoided. This is par-

¹¹ See Behuria (1995:243), Fischer and Pathy (1996:220–221). An Oriya version is provided by Patra (1997:9–13).

¹² It is not only in Hinduism that dreams are considered a source of religious inspiration. For the recent recognition of dreaming as a subject in social anthropology, see Schnepel (2001).

¹³ For the *nisa puja* of the goddess Mangala, which consists of a morning as well as an evening section, see Hauser (2004b).

¹⁴ For celebrations in Cuttack, see Preston (1980).

ticularly noteworthy, since several other Hindu ceremonies specifically take place or commence at this time. However, in the case of *nisa* deities, darkness is required.¹⁵ The beginning and the end of Thakurani Jatra are both scheduled for the first dark hours of a Tuesday, possibly in *chaitra* and excluding full moon.¹⁶ Besides these preferences – and unlike other religious festivals – there is no fixed (Hindu) date for conducting Thakurani Jatra. Hence, its period corresponds to the various epithets of the fierce goddess as she is known in the scriptural tradition: she is Kali (The Black One), Tamasi (Darkness), or in her most destructive aspect Kalaratri (The Black Night).¹⁷

The *nisa* way of worship implies certain risks. First of all, there is the danger of pollution. Once a *thakurani* is worshipped at home, certain precautions have to be taken. If the family deity is of a rather different kind (for instance, Narayan), *puja* should be performed at some distance from the house altar. Moreover, while cooked offerings (*samkuri*, i.e. with rice) are usually shared among the family members, in the case of a fierce goddess they have to be given away to the washer-men (Dhoba) or any other community with a low ritual status. Similarly, during Thakurani Jatra, low-caste assistants receive the food offerings presented to the goddess and her eight sisters. Secondly, there are severe consequences for not worshipping a *nisa* deity correctly. For instance, the recitation of Chandi *patha*, the appropriate scriptural digest, is considered highly dangerous, and the priests warn that its incorrect pronunciation may lead to madness or death. Finally, the danger of a *nisa puja* results from its very performance late at night, that is, when creatures like demons, witches and ghosts might disturb the sincere devotee. Thus, the celebration of Thakurani Jatra requires two kinds of protective ritual. Damala priests, who are known for their magic (tantric) powers, perform both of them. At the opening of the festival, they will fence out any destructive forces by ‘binding the directions’ (*digabandhana*), a ritual that includes decoy offerings of chicken, alcohol, rice and pulses, and that serves to persuade hostile beings to guard the area.¹⁸ Similar to this general protection of ritual space, the Damala also seal the bodily boundaries of the nine pot carriers prior to each nocturnal procession by applying a clod of turmeric paste to each woman’s forehead while speaking sacred formulas to protect her from possession.

Yet Thakurani herself is not only regarded as a divine force but is simultaneously identified with evil beings as a *yogini*, *katyayani* or *dabani* employing ghostly creatures (*bhuta-preta*). She is also called ‘Chandi-Chamundi’, which might be understood

¹⁵ On the association of goddesses with lunar phases, see Kinsley (1998:45), Östör (1980:38, 213).

¹⁶ The focus on the first dark hours of a day contrasts with the general understanding in Orissa and elsewhere in India that the calendrical unit of a day starts at sunrise and that the night belongs to the previous day (see Fuller 1992:263).

¹⁷ Kinsley (1998:67–70, 171, 230), Erndl (1993:23). She is also regarded as the goddess of sleep.

¹⁸ According to White (2003:259), this is a standard preliminary ritual in safeguarding Tantric worship. For ethnographic evidence with regard to goddess festivals, see Handelman (1995:191–192), Tapper (1979:22), Elmore (1915:38–39).

as a dismissive term to signify destructive forces or, on the other hand, as relating to the synergy of two very powerful goddesses, namely Chandi and Chamunda. Their power is highly ambivalent in the sense that some people may approach them not only for spiritual but also for magical purposes (*tantra*). In this case meditation and ascetic practices serve to attain selfish worldly goals like victory over an enemy, or the manipulation and subjugation of others. A similar ambivalence characterises the group of ten Tantric goddesses with whom Budhi Thakurani is identified in her temple iconography. They represent habits, attributes and other features that are usually considered repulsive, or alternatively different forms of wisdom.¹⁹ From the perspective of lay devotees, however, the goddess's association with ghostly creatures manifests itself as nocturnal disturbance. In the neighbourhood of the Desibehera, for instance, one educated middle-class family did not use the ground floor of their house, since during night they felt troubled by the rattling of Thakurani's bangles. A magician was called to ban the haunting goddess, but nevertheless the ground floor remained a storeroom only. The ambivalence of her *nisa* quality also reveals itself during the final procession of Thakurani Jatra. In this case, ordinary women carrying a sacred pot do not receive the bodily protection measures given to Dera female specialists. Hence possession occurs frequently. If these women move or shout in wild anger, their behaviour is clearly attributed to the goddess and not regarded as a violation of the female role model.

CONCLUSION

As has been shown in the previous sections, Thakurani Jatra celebrates the goddess in her capacity as a patroness. Although the main ceremonies take place at night, their aim is not to communicate with demonic or ghostly creatures. In that respect the goddess festival differs not only from nocturnal processions in honour of Virabhadra, where people in Andhra Pradesh worship the spirits of their ancestors (Knipe 1989), but also from nightly performances to exorcise demons, best known through the Sinhalese example presented by Kapferer (1991). Moreover, Thakurani Jatra is not intended to enlighten or 'domesticate' the night in the sense of avoiding its dark character. Thus it differs from the ritual night vigils (*jagarana*) known all over India. The emphasis there is on waking, that is, the denial of sleep, which (in line with abstinence from food) serves as a bodily exercise to adore a deity (for instance Siva at Sivaratri, lit. 'the night of Siva'). This can be achieved by singing hymns or watching spectacular dramatic performances.²⁰ Furthermore, the vigils also serve to keep the gods awake,

¹⁹ On the worship of Tantric goddesses, see Kinsley (1998). White (2003) critically discusses Tantric worship (and its sexual connotations), not only with respect to popular religious practice but also as a projection of competing religious and academic discourses.

²⁰ For an investigation of drama from this perspective drawing on a case study from Goa, see Henn (2000).

that is, alert for the proper maintenance and safeguarding of the world. A burning flame may symbolise this, as Erndl (1993:101–103) has shown with regard to vigils for the mother goddess in northwest India. If the goddess manifests herself in the body of a devotee, it is regarded as a sign of this wakefulness. At Thakurani Jatra, conversely, the nocturnal rituals stress the idea of neither waking nor enlightenment. Instead, it is taken for granted that the goddess travels through the night. There is no need to mention that darkness is the most appropriate time for her worship, since there is no explicit daylight counterpart. The darkness of a goddess is rather seen as one of three complementary essences that constitute the world, each of which are necessary and processual in character. Thus, goddess theology distinguishes (a) darkness or lethargy (*tamas*); (b) passion or activity (*rajas*); and (c) light or purity (*sattva*). Each quality corresponds to certain deities, ways of worship and religious goals.²¹ The *tamas* form, for instance, paradigmatically alludes to an animal sacrifice (*tamas* mode of worship) in honour of the goddess Mahakali (*tamas* deity), who preferably helps to overcome everyday problems (*tamas* merit). It is this logic which implicitly makes a *nisa puja* the most propitious time and atmosphere to meet the quality of the goddess Thakurani.

Like any other period of time (weekdays, months, lunar constellations), night is associated with a particular quality of time that matches the character of specific deities like Budhi Thakurani. Yet her heightened presence late at night is also dangerous. While she might be worshipped, she is also feared for haunting people like any other creature of the night. Still, the nocturnal worship is not subordinated to daytime rituals, since 'nighthood' is regarded as a quality in itself, adequate for a specific religious purpose. Accordingly, the processions of Thakurani Jatra make use of these nocturnal qualities and are not an attempt to negotiate, enlighten or pacify darkness. Against this background, women who participate in the festival perceive the night in ritual terms. They worship the goddess on behalf of their family and represent her for an individual religious purpose. In doing so, their behaviour corresponds to female religious practices during daylight, although this time performed in public. Moreover, since women embody the female divinity, they do not require a male guardian. By contrast, for those women who live at some distance from the old town, a visit to the festival site during the night remains a privilege provided by her family, who joins her. In any case, women do not play with the night, they do not violate social norms: their self-presentation as women remains the same or is even heightened. And if a possessed devotee should shout and jump wildly, this is regarded as just another image of womanhood, this time of Thakurani.

²¹ On the concept of these qualities in goddess theology, see Erndl (1993:22–30), Kinsley (1998:42), Östör (1980:53–56).

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