

A goat for the goddess

William Dalrymple

I am a Bollywood fight director," explained the man holding the goat, "and for many years I was a stunt fighter. Now I am standing for election. That is why I have brought this bakri all the way from Bihar, in my own car - to offer it to the goddess."

Milan Ghoshal leant a little closer, in a confidential manner: "My seven colleagues have come to Ma Tara too," he said, pointing to a small group of burly-looking men in short sleeves loitering some distance away. "You see," he explained, "in our state, politics is only for the strong. There are many powerful men competing for the Bihar Assembly."

This, I knew, was certainly true. Bihar has long been renowned as the most lawless state in India: in past elections, several of the candidates actually fought their campaign from jail.

Milan looked just the right man to fight an election in such a place: he had a thin beard and a shaven head, a broken nose and a deep scar above the left eyebrow. Yet for all the broad-shouldered village wrestler physique, he wore the simple long white homespun kurta of the politician, and around his neck he had strung a simple rudraksh rosary.

"In Bombay," he said, "they called me Milan the Boss. No one can beat me in a fight - not in Bombay and not in Bihar."

"And all this is important in Bihar elections?", I asked.

"Of course," he said, putting the goat down, "Bihar is a rough place. I need Ma Tara to fight alongside me. If she accepts my offering, then maybe with her protection I will win. If not, I have no hope. I am not a rich man, and I cannot spend the money that some of the other candidates will be throwing at the people. "

We were standing in the inner enclosure of the temple at Tarapith near Birbhum in West Bengal, some 200 kilometres from the border with Bihar. The temple lies amid flat, green and bucolic countryside: fertile flood plains where abundant soils and huge skies stretch out endlessly towards the Bay of Bengal - a great green Eden of water and vegetation.

From a distance, Tarapith looked like just any other Bengali village, with its palm weave huts, and still, cool fishpond. But here one building dominated all the others: the great temple, which rose above the surrounding village like a cathedral in medieval Europe. Its base was a thick-walled red brick chamber, broken by an arcade of arches and rising to a great white pinnacle, like the snow capping of a Himalayan peak.

Tarapith is regarded as one of the most powerful holy places in India, the abode of the Devi's Third Eye. Yet despite the reputed power of its presiding deity, compared with the other great pilgrimage sites of the region, Tarapith is little visited. A thin line of pilgrims were queuing to do darshan (pay homage) to the image of the goddess, but although it was approaching the time for the evening arti, the place was still surprisingly empty for such a famous shrine.

The reason for this, I had been told in Calcutta, was that Tarapith had a sinister reputation, notorious for the unsavoury "left-handed" Tantric rituals which are daily performed in the temple. Stranger things still were rumoured to take place in the nearby cremation ground after sunset. Here the goddess was said to live, and at midnight - so Bengalis believe - Tara can be glimpsed in the shadows drinking the blood of the goats slaughtered day after day in an effort to propitiate her anger.

For in this largely vegetarian country, the worship of the goddess at Tarapith involves a great deal of blood sacrifice, of a sort rarely seen elsewhere in modern India: at least 20 goats a day are despatched here to satisfy the goddess's hunger. In the 10th century hymn of a hundred names from the Mundamala-tantra, Tara is called She Who likes Blood, She Who Is Smeared with Blood, and She Who Enjoys Blood Sacrifice. And while Tara has a healthy appetite for

animal blood, the Mundamala-tantra explicitly states that she prefers that of humans, in particular that taken from the forehead, hands and breasts of her devotees. None of this seemed in any way to deter Milan Ghoshal.

"There are very few places where Shakti is worshipped," he said. "That is why I drove for eight hours - 300km - to come here, getting up before dawn. We chose today because it is an ama vashya, a night with no moon. We believe the goddess is at large then, and more open to our prayers."

Milan indicated a platform where a priest was constructing a yagna - a Tantric symbol - from flowers, coconuts, bamboo, vermilion and coloured sand, all part of the ritual of sacrifice. As we watched, Milan talked of his plans to win the election with the aid of the goddess's power:

"I am a fighter," he said, "and so is she. Sometimes in my films the fights are so terrible that people die. Elections in Bihar can be a little like this. But with Ma Tara's protection, I don't think we need fear."

Tara, the Lady Twilight, the Cheater of Death, is renowned as one of the most wayward of Hindu goddesses: according to the Mantra-mahodadhik, the goddess can be found "sitting on a white lotus situated at the centre of the water enveloping the entire universe.

"With her left hands she holds a knife and a skull and, in her right hands she holds a sword and a blue lotus. Her tongue is always moving, and her teeth and mouth appear terrible. She is wearing a tiger skin around her waist, and her forehead is decorated with ornaments of white bone. She is seated on the heart of a corpse and her breasts are hard... [She is] the mistress of all three worlds".

In her frightening aspect, she is not alone, but instead part of a sinister sisterhood: there are a whole brood of dark-skinned untameable Tantric divinities who are worshipped in Bengal, and who here take precedence over the more familiar trinity of male gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. These goddesses, known as the Ten Mahavidyas, are attended by jackals, furies and ghosts. They cut off their own heads, are offered blood sacrifices by their devotees, and prefer to have sex with corpses, straddling them on a burning cremation pyre. Such goddesses - embodying all that would normally be considered outrageous or even repulsive - lie at the shifting threshold between the divine and demonic, and are anti-models, violating approved social values and customs.

At the root of Tantra lies a deeply heterodox concept: the idea of reaching God through opposing convention. Whereas caste Hindus believe that purity and good living are safeguarded by keeping away from unclean places such as cremation grounds, Tantrics believe that one path to salvation lies in inverting these strictures.

The dark and wooded cremation ground in Tarapith is the perfect setting for such a path, and attracts scores of the hardest of hardcore Tantric sadhus - wanderers, sorcerers, witches and skull-feeders. Many of these people have been unhinged by extreme acts of asceticism, and are now looked upon as holy madmen.

Yet in many ways what is most striking about the cremation ground when you visit it is not some exotic or sinister quality, so much as its oddly domesticated feel. Though the doors of the huts here are all flanked by lines of human skulls - many clearly belonging to children - all painted pillar box red and built into the packed mud of the huts, the Tantrics who live here sit sipping tea and playing cards, as if living in a skull-filled cremation ground was the most normal thing in the world.

Shakuntala Bhairavi, a wild-looking Sad-hvi with matted hair and patched saffron robes, told me that she lived in the cremation ground for one reason: so as to be near her deity, Ma Tara. "The dead do not come here to the cremation ground. Only the bodies are here," she said. "The dead take birth again." She paused, then added: "I feel her presence here. Definitely.

This is her home, not the temple. Recently I saw a fox - her vehicle," she said. "Sometimes in my dreams I glimpse her but she has never yet spoken to me."

For Shakuntala, it was clear that the goddess was not something terrible. She talked intimately of the goddess as Ma Tara -Mother Tara - as if she were a benign old matriarch, a quite different image from that on the popular prints that I had seen in the bazaar on the way into the temple. "Tara is my mother," said Shakuntala simply. "How can your own mother evoke fear? When I first came here in a distressed condition, Ma protected me. Now I don't want to go anywhere but stay here. To me, Ma is all. My life depends on her."

By the time I got back to the temple, darkness had fallen and the evening arti was beginning. The shrine chamber was lit up and camphor flames were being circled in front of the deity.

I found Milan sitting patiently on his wall by the yagna, waiting for the priests to complete the sacred symbol. When it was finally done, a fire was then lit in its centre, and in the candles framing its corners. As the flames rose higher, the brahmin threw in handfuls of rice from a thali, all the time reciting Sanskrit mantras, while Milan and his colleagues sat silently cross-legged on the far side. When the ritual was over, Milan got up.

"Now it is time for the sacrifice," said Milan, "my astha bhole."

The goat, which had been tethered a short distance away, was brought forward, and Milan picked it up and put its head in a metal stand shaped like a giant tuning fork. One of the brahmins then painted a saffron stripe on its head and stepped back. Another man, barefoot in a dhoti, came forward with a long sharp cleaver, just like the one held by Tara in the prints.

With a single swipe he cut off the head, and the brahmin pulled the body away where it lay writhing on the ground. There was a strong smell of warm blood, moist earth, decayed flowers and incense. Milan placed a bunch of smoking agarbatti in the sacrificial pit and smeared his forehead with the blood, dipping his fingers in the bloody sand of the pit.

"Now I am ready," said Milan. "All auspicious work starts in the name of Ma. Tomorrow I will announce my candidacy. With Ma's aid, I and my colleagues are ready to fight this battle. She is the most powerful protector that you could want. I tell you: with her power, no one can stand against us."

William Dalrymple's most recent book, 'The Last Mughal: the Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857' (Bloomsbury) won the Duff-Cooper Prize for history and biography. His books include 'The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters'

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