



PROJECT MUSE®

Rebirth

Abul Bashar, Krishna Dutta, Andrew Robinson

Manoa, Volume 19, Number 1, 2007, pp. 187-192 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2007.0031>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217452>

Rebirth

The dwelling place of the household goddess had a circular thatched roof like a miniature barn. When such a roof showed signs of leaking, Jugin of Bhatshala village would be summoned to repair it. Jugin was an old hand at shrine building, long famous for his workmanship. Five years ago he had constructed the frame for the tiles on the cowshed near the shrine, using rafters made of palmyra wood. Though his eyesight had become a little dim, there was still no one to match his handiwork. It was always Jugin who created the showy crown of thatch atop the deity's humble abode. He was an artist as much as a craftsman. Who else but he could fashion such a crucial thing? People's faith in him went deeper still. The lady of the house, Shudharani, believed that Jugin's crown was so splendid that Goddess Lakshmi's auspicious owl perched on it at night. The source of her faith was her lifelong devotion to Lakshmi.

At her shrine, the puja offered to Lakshmi was straightforward. A brass pitcher full of water stood permanently by the outer step of the temple door. Every Thursday, in the evening, Shudharani in company with five other married women performed the puja: they ululated fittingly, smeared vermilion on each other's partings, and then Shudharani herself distributed to the others flowers and food offerings—the prashad. Everything was done correctly: a lamp burned, incense smoldered as the women, saris hooding their heads, prostrated themselves before the goddess. The sandalwood and vermilion marks on the mango leaves tied to the branch in the pitcher gradually dried up in the warmth; and the air lay heavy with the perfume of sprinkled Ganges water. No bell sounded, though; theirs was a silent puja, like a meditation. Neither was the image of the goddess sacrificially immersed. Each aspect of the ritual was simple, timeless, and sacred. Jugin had observed it countless times; he knew its every gesture.

As well as being a shrine builder, Jugin was a folk poet, an accomplished one. He liked to compose songs and rhymes for the boys to sing at the Paush festival in winter. Which people chose to sing them there—or at the autumn harvest festival Nabanna—had never for a moment bothered Jugin Sheikh. He saw nothing wrong in the Muslim boys of Bhatshala singing his

songs at a Hindu festival and collecting aubergines, pumpkins, bananas, and other fruits and vegetables from each house. Even when he was building an abode for Lakshmi in the courtyard of Shudharani's house, he never thought of the fact that though his first name was Hindu, his surname revealed him to be a Muslim. And yet today, he somehow felt everything inside him was being partitioned, all his true feelings being uprooted.

While watching him as he wove together straws, Shudharani had suddenly remarked, "Jugin, your name is not right for you, Jugin."

The remark's unexpectedness puzzled him. He said respectfully, "But Didi, which of us really has the right name? Is Bhatshala rightly named? The village is full of poor Muslims, but it hardly has a grain of bhat—and yet it has a fancy name: Bhatshala, 'full of rice.' I composed a funny song about it once, some twelve years back. 'The rice pot sounds boom-boom:/ bhat in Bhatshala—no room./ Poets are out of verse,/ they hang their heads and curse;/ a noose is hardly worse.' *Ha-ha!* That's why we rely on you, Didi. With a lot of struggle, I can make ends meet by building shrines—even today, when work is scarce."

As Shudharani began to reply, a loudspeaker started up at the Brahma-pada temple in nearby Shivkalitala. Despite the earliness of the hour, a shrill voice began to sing kirtan—devotional songs to Krishna—continuously. Jugin had heard something about this the night before on his way to Shudharani's. A group of kirtan singers had come from Maheshpur, led by a certain Bashab Chandra Das. Once upon a time, Jugin knew, Das had played young heroes in itinerant theatre troupes; now, recognising an opportunity, he had formed a kirtan group of his own. These days, religion was no longer the benign expression of exalted ideals, no longer a matter of graceful contemplative behaviour. Instead, it was a whirlwind of intoxication, a furious blast of emotion, like a desert simoom. Jugin, in his simplicity, had not grasped what lay behind the change, but he had certainly felt its impact. He began to regret his name, his Hindu name. The loudspeaker was pouring forth, blaring its insane sound in every direction, like the wind. Why? Jugin did not know. He thought to himself, *Didi's correct: my name isn't right for me.* And yet, hadn't his hand built the crown of the divine abode, shaped it like the shikara of a temple? Would anyone remember that once he had finished? That a Sheikh had designed the shrine and that its pinnacle was the labour of a poor Muslim poet? Lakshmi's owl, her golden vehicle, perched there, didn't it? How could the owl be so foolish as to disobey the commandment not to touch anything Muslim? Surely the owl did not believe in it. But did Shudharani believe in it? This year, Jugin felt, Shudharani had changed. This year he ought not to have worked for her, he found himself thinking.

Climbing to the crest of the roof, he set about plaiting the straw with slips of bamboo, parting it and tying it with knotted string as if it were hair. As his hands worked, his eyes strayed to the road. A gang of boys in khaki

shorts and white cotton shirts were running towards the market, carrying sticks and swords. Jugin knew what they were up to. In the courtyard of the Temple of the Twenty-two Goddesses at Chakkalitala, they would practice with these weapons. A couple of boys from Shudharani's house who had just finished some rice left over from the previous night ran out after the others. They carried a sinister tin falchion. The adult men of the house were yet to return from their nighttime visit to Brahmapada. There, in the dead of night, the bald-headed ochre-clad swami, the mahant of the temple, would have given them secret mantras. There was holy war—jihad—in Hinduism too: this fact Jugin had only recently perceived. Never before had he seen Hindus brandishing their weapons like this—like Muslims at Muharram. Whom would they fight? The Muharram procession? The idea made Jugin's sweet old face ashen with worry. What was really afoot among the Hindus? They seemed besotted, as though they had taken leave of their senses.

Various kinds of rumour had been reaching his ears. Things had been said on the radio and printed in the papers. Those who were in the know were talking. The incident at the Babri mosque-cum-temple had raised the temperature of such talk. Mr. Jirat, the schoolmaster at Shankarpur, had explained things at length the other day in the mosque. Now it was being said that Emperor Shahjehan had built the Taj Mahal on top of a ruined temple. What did that matter? Everything used to be Hindu, of course, but why were Hindus suddenly wanting to remind everyone of that fact? Were they trying to tell Muslims to leave their country? Jugin at last grasped the truth. But if he left Bhatshala, where would he go? If the Hindus could provide him with a land of rice and curry, that would be fine! It was only because there was no bhat, no food, to be had in Bhatshala that he had come to Didi's village, Gouripur. But look at her now: how grim she seemed! His throat felt dry. *Where can I go?—tell me that. All these sticks and swords threatening us all day, trying to scare us away, and at night who knows what kind of conspiracy being hatched? How can you want to send us away, Didi, when we've lived together so many years? Is that what you want in your heart, Didi: Jugin to go?*

His train of thought brought his hands to a stop, so profound was his agony. A shaft of pain was boring into him. He said aloud, "Why blame my name, Shudha Didi? Everything springs from my birth. When I was born, my mother's cord was found wrapped around me—like a sacred thread! My mother and my aunts were awestruck. Other people looked at me and felt the same. I was a Brahmin, reborn. A Hindu baby had floated into my mother's womb, either in error or on some mysterious current. 'Take special care of your newborn,' they all advised my mother, 'as long as he lives.' Didi, whether you think such a sign is auspicious or not, you must admit I make beautiful straw crowns for your temple. My mother certainly believed I was the son of a Hindu."

“How can that happen, Jugin! It’s just one of those stories. There’s no rebirth for Muslims—you know that,” Shudharani said.

“Not for Muslims,” said Jugin, “but for Hindus there is. I cannot explain these mysteries, Didi. No God—Hindu or Muslim—will come and vouch for my being a Hindu; and yet we all know, don’t we, that who gets born in which womb is God’s will. Tell me this: do all newborn babies come with sacred threads wrapped around them?”

“You should not say such things. In your religion it is really immoral. I don’t believe a word!” Shudharani had become solemn.

Jugin replied, “No one can control our beliefs, Didi! To me your eyes look like the eyes of Suleyman, but you will definitely rebuke me for saying it. I’ve never seen such eyes anywhere.”

“What kind of eyes?” Shudharani frowned.

“The eyes of Suleyman. Sweet, dark brown as catechu. How did you come to have such eyes?”

“Who? Suleyman? Who is he?”

“A Muslim emperor. A prophet. The eyes of your Goddess are black—I wonder where your brown eyes come from. Allah must be responsible,” Jugin concluded contentedly.

Shudharani was sceptical. “More of your stories! I don’t believe any of them.”

“Believe them or not, Didi, but you will never come across anyone who is totally Hindu or totally Muslim. You have Muslim eyes, and I have Hindu hands. Otherwise, how could I make crowns for shrines like this? If the crowns are not Hindu, how could Lakshmi’s owl perch on them: he’d get wind of the difference! Ponder what I say: we are in the hands of Allah at birth. We are all of mixed race, Didi.”

Having spoken, Jugin went back to his work, interweaving the straw with renewed energy. But Shudharani began to grumble. “Eyes of Suleyman—fancy that! Who says so! How absurd! I will not give you any more prashad from today, Jugin. I’m warning you. And no water for your mid-day prayer either. You can go to the mosque for it. You’ve been cheating me all along, asking for wages just when you feel like it. And taking advantage of a woman’s generosity to get prashad, pretending to be Hindu. No more! I won’t help you anymore. I won’t call you anymore after this, I’m telling you. I don’t need you after this. You can leave, go away!”

The uttering of these words pained Shudharani strangely. Unable to restrain herself, she retreated inside the house and muffled a sob. Hers was a patriarchal household, and this year her sons had made strong objection to employing Jugin. People were saying it was a profane act to let a Muslim build the dwelling place of a goddess. The sons had berated their mother, flashed angry looks at her; in their eyes the Muslims were barbarians and intruders. Not only that; hadn’t they once slaughtered Hindus in such numbers that the weight of dead Hindu sacred threads had come to 74 1/2

maunds? That was why Hindus inscribed 74 1/2 at the head of a letter. How could this fact be forgotten? Shudharani had attempted to reason with them. “Was that Jugin’s fault? He’s never killed a Hindu. He’s a poor man, almost dying of hunger—rather than killing anyone! You’re making a scapegoat of him: don’t rob Udo to pay Budo.” A war of words had followed. Finally, Shudharani had rolled her eyes in mockery and said to her son, “This business of 74 1/2—why revive an ancient story? You should be writing the names of gods on letters—not the weight of some old sacred threads. Your culture’s sunk rather low, hasn’t it, Kailash?”

Her obstinacy had prevailed, and her sons had kept off Jugin. But what further arguments and disputes would follow, God only knew. For the time being, Shudharani had ceased to speak to Jugin in her usual pleasant way, ceased to give him prashad or water for his prayers.

At midday, silent and glum, with head bowed, Jugin went helplessly to the local mosque and said his prayers. When he returned, he resumed his work, concentrating hard.

Thursday evening came. The puja was performed in front of him. He received no prashad. *Why should he? Are my eyes Muslim eyes that I should take pity on him?* Shudharani asked herself. *I’m a Hindu through and through, from the nails on my toes to the tips of my hair. That’s what I want to be, a good Hindu, just as our priests—our mahants—have instructed us. Jugin doesn’t know that’s what we are here. He must not come here anymore. I must make this absolutely clear to him.*

Jugin did not eat well that night. He lay down, but sleep would not come; instead he lay brooding, as if he was about to die. Didi would not call him again. The affection had gone out of her eyes. And affection is the essence of everything. When it goes, men become stones. Clearly she no longer trusted him. He thought, *She sees designs in every word I say. My only motive for coming to her is to get some handfuls of food—nothing else. Oh well, I shan’t go there anymore. But it really is too bad that she did not believe the word of my mother.*

A tear welled up quietly in Jugin’s eye. He remembered a rhyme he had known since he was a child; it told the one hundred and eight names of Lord Krishna. He began to say it softly:

*His father Shri Nanda named him Nander Nandan—
Paradise-born One.
Yashoda his mother named him Jadu Bachadhan—
Darling Sweet Son.*

“That was out of her affection for him, Didi.” Jugin continued:

*His teacher Upananda named him Thakur Gopal—
Lord of the Cowherds.
The boys of Braja named him Shundar Rakhhal—
Most Handsome Cowherd.*

*His friend Shubal named him Thakur Kanai—
Noble Lord Krishna.
His friend Shridam named him Rakhalraja Bhai—
Brother Cowherd King.*

“The faith of the cowherds—it has been usurped by the priest, by the mahants. That’s what’s wrong, Didi.”

*The sage Kanva named him Dev Chakrapani—
Lord of the Universe.
His guardian Banamali named him Baner Harini—
Fawn of the Forest.*

“Yes, Didi; the forest fawn, the owl, the peacock—vehicles of the gods and goddesses—they are all good creatures. Theirs, theirs is the true religion.”

Translation from Bengali by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson