

BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDOPADDHYAY'S "RANKINI DEBIR KHADGA"

The Machete of the Goddess

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Sometimes when there is no rational explanation behind certain happenings, we call them supernatural. There might actually be some justification, but they elude our sense of logic. Anyway, I do not want to go into arguments; I will only say that those events are beyond ordinary people like us, and hence, at least for me they are supernatural. I encountered something like this in my life once and I would like to present it to my readers. I leave it to them to decide what to make of it.

It happened quite some years ago. I was teaching at a school in a village called Chero in Maanbhoom. I should tell you that the scenic beauty of Chero is so amazing that whoever has lived there for some time would find the flattened landscape of the Bengal boring. The cottages of the village were all lined up on a flat hill not too high from the plains. The back-doors of the last cottages of each row opened to the forest—to shal, mohua and wood apple trees gracing the top of the hill. I remember a large banyan tree, too, and a number of small and big boulders. When I

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went there the first time, I spotted an old dilapidated temple made of stones.

I had two students from the school with me and both were from Bengali families living in Maanbhoom. I should clarify here that most of the villagers of Chero were originally from Madras even though they could speak Bengali quite fluently. However, how so many people from Madras ended in this remote village of Maanbhoom, is still a mystery to me.

The temple proved to be an element of surprise. It was made of black stones and the shape was somewhat eccentric. It was very different from the other temples of the area. Moreover, it seemed deserted and some of the stones on the south wall had disappeared. On looking at that temple in the wildernesses I had a strange sensation. And suddenly I realized that it was fear. Now why was I afraid of a deserted and broken temple? Yet I was curious enough to take a good look at it when one of my students called me from the rear, "Don't go there, Sir."

"Why not?" I asked.

"There're probably snakes in there. Nobody visits the place anymore."

"What kind of a temple is that?"

"That's the temple of the goddess Rankini. But even the oldest folks of our village have not seen any festivity ever occurring here. There is no effigy inside either.... Let's go from here."

The two boys seemed to be in a great hurry to get away from the place.

I asked a few other people about Rankini devi, but noticed with surprise that nobody wanted to talk about her. So, at one point I also stopped asking questions.

About a year passed. There were not many students at the school and I renewed my old interest of collecting old pots and *punthis*. About five to six miles away from Chero was a small hill called Jaichandi. The temple of Jaichandi was on top of the hill where in winter village fairs would take place. There was also a small railway station nearby. In a small slum near the hill lived a few Brahmins among whom I found Chandramohan Panda. He would chat with me in the local dialect and he seemed to know much about the local people and their history. He also happened to be the postmaster of the local post-office. He told me stories of tigers that lived in the nearby jungles and caused havoc for the people. Many of my rainy afternoons were spent in his abode. However strange and bizarre those tales might have been, they did not seem impossible in that alien land.

One day, Chandra Panda asked me if I had seen the temple of Rankini devi. I looked at him in surprise because nobody else had told me anything about it except for that student of mine.

"I've seen the temple, but whoever I ask about the goddess refuses to say anything. Perhaps you can tell me why people act so strangely."

"Everybody here is afraid of Rankini devi," replied Chandra Panda.

"But why?"

"Years ago a group of barbaric people lived in Maanbhoom. Rankini devi was their deity. Later on, when the Hindus came, she became theirs too. But she is not like the other Hindu gods—they used to sacrifice humans there, you know. Even sixty years ago, such was the practice. Some believe that if the goddess Rankini gets angry, she would cause death and famine. There is a saying that the bloodied machete of the goddess would be found before any such disaster. I heard all these tales about forty years ago when I first came to this place."

"Did you ever see any idol there?"

"No. All I saw was the broken temple. The effigy was carried away to some far-off country. One of the descendants of the priests of Rankini told me all these. He used to live in that village of yours. I had been to his house many times too. He was the one who told me about the bloodied machete. He was the last of that family."

"What kind of a statue did they have?"

"It was Kali, I heard. Apparently, it used to be decorated with skulls. There's a mound behind the temple where excavations have exposed human skulls."

No wonder the local people were so afraid of her. Even I felt uncomfortable

