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## **Devi's Hand Rising amidst a Crowd of Lotus Buds : An Obstinate "Emic" Reading of Toru Dutt's "Jogadhya Uma"**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to present an insider's view of Indic religious practices and sensibilities with reference to Toru Dutt's poem "Jogadhya Uma". The ethnographic documentation of one's own culture should be seen as a valid means of critically engaging with literature, especially in the context of an Indian reader's reading of Indian writing in English. This paper argues that, rather than pretending to be a detached observer of literature produced on one's own culture, one should boldly attempt to foreground the ways in which the reader is enmeshed in an intricate web of interrelated socio-cultural and political frames of reference that underpins his/her own cultural position. By presenting detailed ethnographic documentation of the natural and cultural ambience of the temple of Goddess Yogadya, and underlining my own affective engagement with the diachronic and synchronic cultural co-ordinates of that temple, in both ecological and cultural terms, I insist that we need to re-validate those modes of literary reading which underscore that, when looked at from the "emic" perspective, the text

may yield certain meanings which are lost in the conventional readings that seek to conform to the hidden prejudices promoting globally standardized readings.

**Keywords:** “Emic”, Goddess Yogadya, ethnographic documentation, “affective fallacy”, Toru Dutt, “nonhistoricised pasts”, Goddess spirituality

The domain of English Literary Studies, especially in India, seldom encourages us to be naughty critics. Of course, it is not just a problem with India. Everywhere in the world, a fossilized language, a pompous artifice that negates and denigrates the value of individual life experiences, a language that arrogantly distances itself from the domain of the “commoners” and “common knowledge” – passes off as academic language. It ensures two things – first, the complete detachment of the academy from real life, and secondly, the lessening of the utility of “academic” life in the larger societal context. Academic writing is what life writing is not, and yet it pretends to make decisive comments on life, on lives, lives lived in fiction and reality. However, in this paper, I am going to don the mantle of the naughty critic who is punishable by the Eurocentric global parameters of literary criticism. I will adopt all those methods of criticism that are “deeply problematic”, to borrow the expression of academic dismissal and exclusion, the language of power passing off as academic rigour. Yes, I will commit endless “affective fallacies” [Wimsatt (in collaboration with Beardsley) 21-40], though from a very different perspective. I will be over-over-over-subjective, totally dismantling the requirements of critical “objectivity”. I will *appropriate* the poem of Toru Dutt, “Jogadhya Uma”, detaching it from its “historical context”: my reading of this poem would boldly bypass historicism, whether old or new. I will, in fact, argue that “Jogadhya Uma” should be taken as an excellent literary example that

illustrates the dissonance between – on the one hand - the Eurocentric historiography that informs both Old and New Historicism and, on the other hand, the pressure of the “nonhistoricised pasts” (Nandy 1-2) that informs the religious consciousness of everyday Hinduism, something which cannot be accommodated by any of the Western theoretical chalices used to contain the wine called “folklore”. I will talk about myself much, about my beliefs, my journeys, my experiences, thereby deliberately performing the aberration that makes a critic “unacceptable” in the contemporary academy. I have not always been naughty in this way, while doing “literary criticism”, and have abided by the “laws”. Hence, the reason for my present defiance must be charted first, and only then would I go on to set my naughty criticism in motion.

When the West studies Indo-English poetry or even Afro-English poetry for that matter, it looks at the Other. The reading does not actually disturb its essentially “anthropologizing” (Chakrabarty 253) gaze. However, when the resident African or Indian sets out to critically read the writing produced by one of their “race”, she is baffled as to which mode of reading to adopt. She does not read about the Other, and yet she is not emboldened enough to read the images of her Self projected in the text from the perspective of her lived experiences. She does not dare to commit an affective fallacy; she does not dare to set in motion what I would like to call an autobiographical violence, a violence that inserts the life of the reader into the text and whisks the text off to the domain of her life, her cultural *oikos* and individual *bios*.

When Kenneth Pike championed participant observation in anthropological studies, he thought that it would espouse the “emic” approach in anthropological research,

which was “seeing things from the Natives’ point of view”, something which, Pike believed, “would promote cross-cultural understanding and combat ethnocentrism in accordance with the doctrine of cultural relativism” (Erickson and Murphy 138). However, in spite of its conspicuously noble intentions, the project of participant observation in anthropology too often fails to really understand or appreciate – or even just accept – a different culture. The reason is that the West’s image of itself as the active agent in knowledge production – its idea that it is the actor and the non-West is to be acted upon – fails to acknowledge the basic human equality between the knower and the known in the ethnographic context, thereby continuing to ground cultural anthropology in an unequal relationship between West-as-knower and the Orient-to-be-known (Abu-Lughod 138-143). My question is: how can the “native” herself be enabled to produce knowledge about her existence that would be critical as well as creative, especially in that disciplinary domain of the humanities where ethnography and literary critique crisscross? I am fully aware of the problems associated with native anthropology which Sonia Ryang charts out (143-147). I appreciate Kirin Narayan’s criticism of the “trend... to label native anthropologists as ‘insiders regardless of their complex backgrounds’” (Ryang 144). However, I don’t accept the view that the native ethnographer is always conditioned by some identitarian particularism while the Western anthropologist is the eye that watches from above, free from all personal interests. Precisely, if the native Hindu is speaking from her caste position, then it is also possible that the Western anthropologist is actually speaking from a hidden Christocentric vantage point. Ryang says:”... we hear from Jennifer Robertson ... who writes critically of the facile assumption of anthropologists’ inclination to write about

themselves, that is, reflexively: the fact that one is from a certain area should not play any significant role in the assessment of scholarship” (144)

This is the approach which I will oppose vehemently because it entrenches the fundamental Western binary of the knower and the known, framed within unequal power relations, and insists that the knowledge to which the native person has access is meaningless, without value, or something that is *equally* available to the non-native as well. We need to understand that the subjective bonding between the native subject and her “life-world” (Schutz and Luckmann 3-5) is something that is available only to her, not just at the level of collective/racial experiences, but more importantly in terms of her individual experience. In the case of a mode of literary criticism that crisscrosses at intricate junctures with ethnography, not just “reflexivity” (Davies 5-10) but even overt subjectivity may be useful. And hence, precisely, I have to be a naughty ethnographer as well as a naughty critic in order to defy the repressive order of legitimizing humanistic documentation.

I prefer the term “documentation” to “knowledge” because it is less pretentious and pompous than the other. I can document my feelings, my responses, my psychic intertextualities after reading Dutt’s poem. These experiences, enmeshed in my past feelings and future hopes as well as my present existential location, may or may not be shared by all other readers who come from – apparently – cultural backgrounds similar to mine. They may or may not share my feelings – and this is an issue that can never be empiricistically settled. However, even when my responses remain unique and “my own”, when I relate them, I make a documentation, without claiming to produce knowledge. The approach I am

taking is more akin to the “affective fallacy” than “native anthropology” (Ryang 143-145), but my *affect* is, of course, not outside the scope of ethnographic documentation.

I have deliberately included the somewhat outdated term “emic” in the subtitle of this paper, as I wish to show that, as documentation, the data supplied by the emic perspective, whether it is adopted by the native anthropologist or the non-native one, remains valid, and significant. The First World bosses of literary criticism as well as those of ethnography have always told us (we the Third Worlders being ontological aberrations of “humanity”) that our individual lives, our individual views are not important. We have accepted this attitude and internalized it, knowingly or unknowingly. We, the over-emotional Third World beings, are ever anxious that we may commit the affective fallacy; we are afraid of having our affect exposed to the affectless academy (whether Indian or global) that even does not hesitate to flaunt its Eurocentrism. You may ask me: what does the Third World have to do with the affective fallacy? Do not the conceptualizers of this “fallacy” talk about Western critical traditions? Yes, of course. But I am acutely aware of the fact that the Western committer of affective fallacies is much more pardonable than her Third World counterpart, because the latter is an instance of a type, and not an individual: she is not supposed to have affects worth attention.

I refuse to begin with the “historical background” to the phenomenon called Toru Dutt – Gosse’s confusing comment that Dutt was a pure Hindu in terms of her sensibility and adored the Indic mythic and folk narratives transmitted by her mother (Gosse xi-xii); Meenakshi Mukherjee’s insistence on Toru’s Bengaliness rather than her Indianness (90,96-97, 105-106); Tricia Lootens’s dissection of the strain of

Orientalism and imperialism in Edmund Gosse's patronizing comments on Toru (Lootens 577-578), and so on, on and on. I, an intensely living being, a practising Hindu, enter the text, come out of it, and carry it to my own life experiences, to the world of my feelings and beliefs. I wallow, like a dusky elephant, in the violet bliss of my religious, sensory and intellectual affects, committing fallacies that refuse to look forward to pardons. I even refuse to remain secular in my approach and rather adopt the "sacredsecular" perspective of "contemplative cultural critique", such as Lata Mani insists on (1-4).

And hence, I begin with a marvellous vision: a goddess's hand, adorned with conch bangle, rising from the depth of the water in the midst of a crowd of lotus buds (Dutt 63). The non-naughty literary critic speaks of Dutt's crafty use of "folklore", whereas I try to dive deeper into the religious semantics of the image conjured up. The reason is simple: what is folklore for the "standard" critical eye is, from *my* emic perspective, religion. I fully agree with Kirin Narayan that it's almost impossible to find out the ultimate and absolute point of authenticity in native anthropology: we can never find a pure insider (Ryang 144). For instance, it is not just the Western critic but also the secular critic from the Indian metropolis who will find "folklore" in "Jogadhya Uma", rather than religion. Even a critic positioned in Burdwan, a mofussil town in West Bengal wherefrom the distance of Kshiragram (Khirogram in the Bengali pronunciation), the setting of Toru's poem, is less than fifty kilometer, may decide to read "Jogadhya Uma" in a perfectly secular way, without being bothered about the "thick description" (Geertz 3-16) of the temple of Yogadya (spelt as Jogadhya in Toru's poem) that could be provided from an emic perspective of ethnography. Kirin Narayan rightly points



out that the anthropologist's positionality is always a matter of "shifting identifications" (Ryang144). Precisely, it is I, the naughty critic, who read the poem in this way – my reading is influenced but not imperiously conditioned by my ethnic or religious identity. A person from the same religious, ethnic and regional background may read the poem in a very different way. In other words, multiple emic readings are possible, and literary criticism, if it really champions pluralism, ought to accept each of them. My emic position may differ from that of my co-native; and the multiplicity of emic interpretations emanating from this difference needs to be celebrated. However, in the following passages, I simply document the outcome of the complex psychic and spiritual interaction between Toru's lines and the rhythms of my life-world.

Kshiragram is located in the district of PurbaBardhaman, in West Bengal. I was born in the town of Bardhaman (also spelt as Burdwan), which is the district headquarters of PurbaBardhaman. Incidentally, Kshiragram is adjacent to my mother's ancestral village, and I have visited it a number of times. The Yogadya temple in Kshiragram is famous for its status as a Sati Pitha. According to the myth of Sati (an incarnation of the Divine Feminine in Hinduism) and Shiva (one of the Hindu Trinity), Daksha, Sati's father, arranged a fire sacrifice where he deliberately invited everyone from the universe except Sati and her husband, Shiva, as Daksha did not like his son-in-law. Sati, however, visited Daksha's fire sacrifice and tried to persuade him to accept the divine greatness of Shiva. The stubborn Daksha, instead of listening to her, continued to vilify Shiva publicly. An angry Sati, in order to punish Daksha, burnt her body through a yogic process. When Shiva came to know this, he jeopardized Daksha's fire sacrifice and began a destructive dance with Sati's

corpse on his shoulder. In order to save the universe from this destructive dance, Vishnu cut off Sati's body into fifty one parts which fell at several places on the earth. Each of these places, as the *puranas* and the tantras claim, became sacred spots where Devi is specially present forever, bestowing boons to her devotees (Mukhopadhyay 10-12, 77-78). Kshiragram is such a Sati pitha, where the right great toe of Sati had fallen, and the mystic energy of Devi is palpably present there (Mukhopadhyay 53; *Kshiragram* 8, 17). Though Toru's poem does not refer specifically to this status of Kshiragram as a Sati Pitha, it indicates in various ways that the village is an important site of Shakti worship (Dutt 57-61). In fact, the story Toru tells is well-known to me, and like her (Mukherjee 97, 105), I have also heard it from my mother, and from various female relatives from my mother's side. This story is what is called a *sthalapurana*, the *purana* or mythic narrative that is local rather than national, and, in many cases, vernacular rather than "classical"/Sanskritic (Shastriiii-xiv). However, we need to remember that, in everyday Hinduism, the vernacular and the Sanskritic go hand in hand, and hence, in the context of the local devotional dynamics of a Sati Pitha like Kshiragram, the *sthalapurana*, apparently delinked from the Sanskritic sources of the Sati myth, would nevertheless seamlessly merge with that pan-Indian myth in celebrating the glory of the Goddess.

It is interesting to note that, while the site of Yogadya is a sacred spot associated with Sati, Toru designates Yogadya as Uma, who is the second incarnation of the Divine Mother after She terminates her incarnation in the form of Sati. Here too, the anomaly is only apparent, as, in the Sati Pithas, Devi is present in various forms, including Durga, Kali and Uma. Especially, in Toru's imagination, Yogadya Devi is equated with Uma who happens to be the centre of various popular

narratives in Bengal about the family of Shiva (Mukherjee 105-106). However, Yogadya was also said to be a fierce goddess, fond of human sacrifices (Chattopadhyay, Himanshu 23-25; Chattopadhyay, Nibaran 41-42; Vidyaratna 35-37). In the poem, "Jogadhya Uma", the myth of the goddess's buying conch bangles from a conch bangle seller on the ghat of the Dhamach Dighi, a big lake in Kshiragram (Chattopadhyay, Nibaran 43; Vidyaratna 34-39) is taken up (Dutt 54-64), and the fierce history of the worship of Yogadya is bracketed off. Was Toru acquainted with the other legends of Yogadya? I can't say. However, rather than using the Sanskritic "Yogadya", Toru spells the name of the goddess as "Jogadhya", which is the Bengali pronunciation of her name. We need to underline the fact that many of the Bengali Hindus today, outside as well as inside the district of Purba Bardhaman- especially those within the fold of Shaktism – are acquainted with Toru's poem on Yogadya. Many of them have read the poem in its Bengali translation by Satyendranath Datta, a famous Bengali poet (Mukherjee 106). Books on the Sati Pithas and Goddess Yogadya would often refer to Toru's poem (and its Bengali translation too) while celebrating the glory of the goddess of Kshiragram (Chattopadhyay, Himanshu 6-21; *Kshiragram* 44-59).

However, as I have already promulgated, my approach would be more personal, affectively emic and hence "fallacious". I would not engage in the game of Othering my Self while reading the poem. In the ballad on Yogadya, Toru presents the narrative of the mystic appearance of the Goddess before a seller of conch shell bangles in the village Khiragram (Khirogram). Let me, the naughty critic, interject – I am no secular person; I believe in and worship this Goddess. The *shankha* (conch bangle) seller, while visiting Khirogram, meets an extremely beautiful young woman on

the ghat of a large “lake-like tank” (Dutt 54-55). The woman exudes some mystic aura but the *shankha*-seller cannot fathom the hidden mystery of her appearance, even though he intuitively discovers that she is awe-inspiring:

Oh she was lovely, but her look  
Had something of a high command  
That filled with awe. (56)

While I am supposed to analyse this awe psycho-analytically, by pretending to be positioned far above the Bengali Hindu *shankha*-seller, I rather choose to partake of this awe, to celebrate it as a potent means of satisfying my hunger for the affects generated by and informing popular Goddess cultures in Bengal.

The woman buys the conch bangles from the seller, and tells him to ask her father, the priest of the temple of Devi, to pay the price for the bangles. She also tells him exactly in which box in the priest’s house the necessary amount of money would be found (Dutt 56-58). Then she dives in the water to have a bath, and the *shankha*-seller reaches the house of the temple priest (Dutt 58-59).

When the *shankha*-seller tells him that his daughter has bought conch bracelets from him, the priest is surprised, as he does not have any daughter of his own. However, the box in his house which the mysterious woman had referred to is finally found, and the money required for paying the price of the conch bangles is also discovered (Dutt 60-62). The priest comes to understand that it was none but the Goddess, whom he has worshipped for so long, who had appeared before the bracelet seller and deceived him. They both rush to the lake on whose ghat she had appeared (Dutt 61-62). They can’t find “the lady of the noble face” in that still and

peaceful environment (Dutt 62), and the priest prays to the Goddess:

Must we return home desolate?  
 Oh come, as late thou cam'st unsought,  
 Or was it but an idle dream?  
 Give us some sign if it was not,  
 A word, a breath, or passing gleam.(63)

And the sign, the divine response comes, not as a disembodied word, but as an embodied vision of the Devi's hand:

Sudden from out the water sprung  
 A rounded arm, on which they saw  
 As high the lotus buds among  
 It rose, the bracelet white, with awe.  
 Then a wide ripple tost and swung  
 The blossoms on that liquid plain,  
 And lo! The arm so fair and young  
 Sank in the waters down again.  
 They bowed before the mystic Power  
 And as they home returned in thought,  
 Each took from thence a lotus flower  
 In memory of the day and spot.(63)

The image is powerful: the goddess's hand rising from the depth of the water, in the midst of lotus buds, with the conch bangle round it. Constantina Rhodes, while interpreting the iconography of Lakshmi, focuses on the relationship between Lakshmi, water and the lotus as interrelated images of the sacrality of existence (15-17). As she puts it: "Like all forms of life, the form of the goddess begins in the waters" (15). However, in the case of "Jogadhya Uma", the form of the goddess, unlike Lakshmi, does not begin in the waters. She is the Great Goddess, the "mystic

Power” that is, as it were, even more primal than water. However, it seems that she moves in and out of the water.

As I go through the lines of Dutt and as I remember the wide and deep lake of Kshiragram called KshirDighi (other than the one named DhamachDighiwherfrom Devi’s hand had emerged), shaded by trees, where I had fed the fish (like other devotees), a deep spiritual truth dawns on me: if water is the mother of life on earth, then the Mother Goddess cannot but be the mother of water itself, the ultimate source of all life. As India faces intense water crisis today, one gradually comes to appreciate the sacrality of the water wherfrom the Goddess may raise her hands and reassure us that life won’t end on earth. As Rhodes insists, drawing on the etymology of the term *devi*, “In English as well as in Sanskrit, luminosity and playful movement are two ways of verbalizing a singular phenomenon. . .”(5). She associates the term *devi*with “the excitement of uncertainty” (5). This excitement is what throbs at the heart of “Jogadhya Uma”. However, the relation between water and the Great Goddess, especially in Bengali culture, has many a dimension. The idols of Durga are made out of clay for the autumn festival of Devi and then immersed in the water. In the Yogadya temple too, there is a peculiar ritual associated with water, even though the image of the goddess there is not a clay image but a stone one. Throughout the year, her stone image is placed beneath the water of the KshirDighi, into which Sati’s toe is said to have fallen (Chattopadhyay, Himanshu 4). It is only on certain special occasions that the image is taken out of the water and placed in a shrine which is different from her main temple at the heart of the village (Chattopadhyay, Himanshu 4; *Kshiragram* 14-15). In the main temple, there is no image of Devi, and she is worshipped on an altar in the middle of which there is a deep pit. Hanuman is said to have brought Devi from the

netherworld (*patala*) to Kshiragram through this pit, as the priests of Devi Yogadya would point out. According to the Bengali version of the *Ramayana*, composed by Krittibas, and many other Bengali texts, Mahiravana, a demon, brought Rama and Lakshmana to the netherworld to sacrifice them in front of Devi whom he worshipped. Hanuman journeyed to the *patala* to save Rama and Lakshmana and ultimately brought the goddess to Kshiragram and she began to be worshipped there (Chattopadhyay, Himanshu 3-4, 22-23; Devasharman 97-99; *Kshiragram* 18-20).

Interestingly, in all these mythic images, there is a consistent idea – nay, an icon even – of Devi rising from the depth of the earth/water. And yet, this rising is not what we can designate as the “beginning” (a la Rhodes) of the goddess. In Shaktism, in its devotional as well as scriptural aspects, the Goddess is seen as without beginnings and endings, just like the Vedantic Brahman. And hence, water is not the locus of her beginning but the domain of her *lila*, or play. While the orthodox religious cultures, whether in the West or in India, are afraid of the depth of the earth, terrified by what is far beneath the surface of being, mystic religions of the world, including tantra, celebrate the depth of being, the fathomless mysteries beneath the surface of water and earth (Mukhopadhyay 52-53). The Yogadyatemple is also a mystic site of tantric Shaktism, and it is noticeable that the deity resides under water throughout the year, rising occasionally to accept the worship offered by her devotees. Is she *originally* a goddess of the netherworld, the deity worshipped by Mahiravana, who is brought by Hanuman out of the netherworld? We can't say. It appears, however, that, within the tantric framework of mystic Shaktism, Yogadya decides to journey between the depth of the water and the surface thereof, between the earth's entrails and its face, rather than

remaining confined to either the netherworld or the sunlit earth surface.

The hand that rises from the depth of the water in the midst of a crowd of lotus flowers is a hand that cares for the mundane beings, even for those who fail to recognize the Goddess, roaming under “playful” (a la Rhodes) guises. The popular narratives of Shaktism abound in such images. The goddess, in the popular tales of Bengal, often appears as a mortal woman, and people fail to recognize her, due to which she disappears. However, she responds to her compunctious devotees, and offers them a sign of her grandeur that operates as a token of her permanent link with her votaries. In fact, the story of Devi buying conch bangles from a bangle seller and later on revealing her glory to a priest/devotee/ascetic who is directed by her to pay the price of the bangles to the seller is found in some other Shakta sites as well. We find stories of Devi being born to a human father and abandoning him when he tries to impose his authority on her; we hear narratives of Devi deceiving humans to test the intensity of their devotion to her. And these narratives – or rather narratemes – are not just “folkloric” in nature, they are often found in both vernacular and Sanskritic traditions.

Toru’s poem gives the impression that it is set on an autumn morning, in the season of the Goddess. The mist kissed by the sunbeams, the dew, the preponderance of lotus flowers, the appearance of the Goddess (Dutt 54-56, 62), everything in this poem connects me with the smell and touch of the Goddess that autumn, in Bengal, stands for. We, the Bengali Hindus, wait eagerly for autumn, for the season of Devi. How did Toru feel while writing this poem? Did she smell the intensity of autumn? Did she emotively relate to the autumnal Durga Puja? Or was she confined to a different



“structure of feeling” (Williams 128-135), conditioned by a belief in Christian supremacism (Ganesh 85-88; Mukherjee 110)? At the end of the poem, she acknowledges, “Absurd may be the tale I tell” (64). Is she, then, unable to emotively relate to the autumn morning, the ripples in the lake of Kshiragram, the hand of the Goddess rising from the water amidst the lotus buds? No. As she points out, the tale is dear to her, because she “loved the lips from which it fell” (64). However, I would argue against the simplistic assertion that she loves the tale merely because it was narrated by her mother (Gosse xxiv; Lootens 576-578; Mukherjee 97). Rather, I would like to insist that, probably, in her imagination, the mortal mother and the immortal one, i.e., Goddess Yogadya who is apparently distanced from the Christian universe, get fused in an arcane and profound way. The hand that rises from the waters is not the hand of precolonial or premodern Hinduism beckoning at the children of colonial modernity; it is not even the hand of just a “goddess”. The hand that rises from the waters, from the permanent fluidity of myth and nonhistoricised pasts, is the hand of the Mother who is more ancient than any figuration of God (or even Goddess), whether Hindu or Christian. Like me, did Toru too perceive ripples of maternal love in the water she imagined to be the secret playground of Jogadhya Uma?

How do I read this poem, as a practising Hindu, and, to be more specific, as a practising Shakta? The lore is sacred to me; it is more than folktale. I read it as a scaredsecularist who finds in the water of the lakes of Kshiragram a legitimate locus of sacrality, who knows that *that* water enshrines the goddess in its bosom. The poem has a special appeal for me because it reminds me of my childhood visits to rural Bengal, where stillness houses hidden mysteries, and water bears divinity in its womb. It presents a series of images and

sensations: the rustling breeze, the trembling leaves, the dust of the road and the water in front of you - where, deep down, a loving hand waits for you, to give you new energies to lend meaning to your existence. That is the secret of Bengali Shaktism which is grounded in natural ecology - in the touch of water and wind, in the smell of wet earth and jasmine blossoms, in the love of the fragile tokens of eternity, in the impermanent natural joys emanating from an eternal Goddess. Of course, Toru's concern is not Bengali Shaktism; we can't even say how far she could really relate to the emotive forms of popular Hinduism. But when I read her poem, I seek to appropriate it into my religious sensibility, as would probably do many other Bengali Shakta readers of her poem.

However, is that not *bad*? How can I immerse myself in something which I am supposed to objectify? The fallacious reading, impressionistic to the point to academic disqualification - that is, *my* reading of "Jogadhya Uma" - refuses to budge from the still atmosphere of Kshiragram, imbued with the *natura*sacrality of the Goddess that I have experienced in visual, auditory and tactile ways. I read the poem with my sensory impressions of that temple and that lake embedded in my body and mind; I refuse to come out of this affective fallacy. The critics of Indo-English literature often point out the problem with its target audience (Mukherjee<sup>32</sup>, 37). However, I think, we should now shift the focus from the target reader to the actual reader. In my case, the reader is one who knows English, and yet retains his/her connection with the popular (local) religious formations of India. Can't I refuse to hold as secular something which is of deep religious and emotional value to me? Can't I read into Dutt's poem my Shakta sensibility? Why should it matter to me whether Duttherself shared or even

sympathized with the religious sensibility of the bangle seller or the priest in “Jogadhya Uma”? *I* do share their emotive orientation. I would like to echo their prayer to the Goddess.

The legend Toru Dutt recounts is not part of “history” but an element of our “nonhistoricised pasts”. It is not a matter of “colonial modernity”, the idea of which we tend to pompously adhere to. Even though Dutt says that the tale recounted by her is “ill-suited to the marching times” (64), her times, that is, the times of high imperialism, have not been able to make it irrelevant to Bengali Shaktism. Precisely, the legend of Yogadyawas there before the advent of colonial modernity, and it is still alive in our popular Hindu consciousness. It is the past that informs our life and keeps our future open. The poem speaks of the grace of the Goddess. The priest had always worshipped her but did not obtain her vision. The bangle seller, on the other hand, gets to see her but can't recognize her (Dutt 61-62). This is the inscrutable way of the Goddess. But the poem as well as the legend dwells on Devi's grace more than on her mysteries. Her hand, rising from the water, the reassuring hand, like the lotuses around it, conveys the message that she is always there, even though you fail to see her or to recognize her despite getting her vision.

The Shakta saints and even the ordinary Shakta devotees have always waited for the emergence of that reassuring hand from the ripples of doubt, awaited that most potent token of her presence emerging out of the stillness of everyday existence. This waiting has been laughed at by colonial modernity, by a secularism which hides its inherent Christocentrism in supremely canny ways. But, that hand has survived the onslaught of all denigration, all anti-pagan crusades, all attempts at crushing our selfhoods. The lotuses

have continued to bloom in our spiritual world, and that hand has shaped and reshaped our postcolonial spirituality, by fracturing the “historicity” of the colonial moment, by placing itself beneath the surface of our seasons and lifting itself, as easily as the jasmine or lotus blooms, out of an ostensible cultural stagnation that is nonetheless pregnant with possibilities.

In Toru’s poem, Devi’s vision blesses the family of the conch bracelet seller with uninterrupted prosperity (64). However, the most interesting thing is that both the priest and the bangle seller collect from the lake, wherefrom Devi’s hand emerged, two lotus flowers “in memory of the day and spot” (Dutt 63). This is, it goes without saying, an alternative order of memory and time than what is prevalent in the historicity of colonial modernity. They took two lotus flowers to commemorate Devi’s vision. But it was a physical token of that moment – Devi’s hand had emerged in the midst of the lotus flowers, and the water and the flowers were blessed with her graceful touch. I too gather another lotus from the lake, entextualized in Toru’s poem, and carry it with me, as a token of my postcolonial spirituality. Even if it droops or dries up, it will still continue to bear the physical memory of the Goddess’s touch. The memory of that epiphanic vision - Devi’s hand emerging in the midst of a crowd of lotus flowers, with a gentle ripple in the water –would rejuvenate the lotus I carry, even if it loses its *rasa*. It does not matter whether Toru Dutt shared my religious sensibility or not. It’s enough that she wrote the poem and presented the epiphanic vision of Devi through her appealing ballad. I take it as a stimulant for my religious fervour, grounded in Goddess spirituality, and move on.

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