



ASSUMED DIVINITY LEADING TO INSANITY AND DEATH – A STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTURBANCE OF A TEMPLE DANCER IN MUNSHI'S *JAYA SOMNATH* (1940)

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Article Info:

Article Received: 10/08/2013

Revised on: 13/07/2013

Accepted: 17/08/2013

ABSTRACT

Shri Kanaiyalal M. Munshi (1887-1971), the most distinguished writer of Gujarati literature left the readers spell bound by writing historical novels depicting the grandeur of Gujarat. He was from the beginning, much concerned about the dwindling glory of Gujarat. In 1910, he highlighted the conquest of Somnath and also coined the word Gujarat-ni-asmita 'Gujarat Consciousness' through his literary labours and by means of organizations, founded and managed by him. He concentrated on making Gujarat consciousness a living factor. Though set in the past, the novel *Jaya Somnath* is realistic both in its relevance to the contemporary scene and in the portrayal of the fundamental human passions of love and power. The dead pages of Gujarat's history become a real experience for the people through the novel.

Jaya Somnath (1940) is based on the depiction of mortal crisis through which Gujarat passed when Sultan Mahmud of Gazni attacked and destroyed thrice, the sacred temple of Somnath. It is a moving and fascinating account of the crusade which Gujarat fought to defend its honour and save its soul. Around the ancient temple of Somnath, which is the centre and the inspiration of the life of Gujarat, the epic struggle takes place. The novel revolves round the character of a temple dancer Chaula who considers herself the *ardhangini* (wife) of Lord Somnath. She is utterly shattered when the *lingam* of Lord Somnath is destroyed by Mahmud of Gazni. Her voyage from an ordinary temple dancer to the queen of King Bhimdev and again assuming the role of a temple dancer is what makes the novel attention catching. The present paper focusses on Chaula's assumed divinity that creates psychological disturbance in her; turns her insane and ultimately pushes her towards death.

Key words: Gujarat-ni-asmita, ardhgini lingam, bhakti, ekadashi, shivratri, shikhar, kapali, mogra, billi, mudras, devadasi.

Jaya Somnath (1940), the most mature of Munshi's novels presents the struggle of Rajput princes of Gujarat to protect the holy temple of Somnath from the ransacking hordes of formidable Mahmud of Gazni. In 1024 the Sultan Mahmud Gazni set out on his last famous expedition to the Southern coast of

Kathiawar along the Arabian Sea, where he sacked the city of Somnath and its renowned Somnath Temple, killing over 50,000 people who tried to defend it. Mahmud personally broke the gilded *lingam* to pieces. He took them back to his homeland and placed them in the steps leading to the newly built Jamiah Masjid,

so that they would be stepped upon by those going to the mosque to pray.

Munshi has imparted an imaginary flavour to the novel *Jaya Somnath* by narrating the efforts of Rajputs in defending the temple. As against the facts of invasion of Mohammed Gazni and demolition of Somnath Temple, Munshi has emphasized the Kshatriya temper of the Rajputs who strove very hard to save the temple of Somnath. Munshi has depicted the episode of Chaula's love with the purpose of effacing the defeat and pain of the victory of Mohammed Gazni. Munshi has tried to glorify the valiant soldiers who sacrificed their lives to protect the Somnath temple.

Chaula, the Temple Dancer is described as a majestic woman embodying perpetual and undying love for Lord Somnath, constituting the purest form of *bhakti*. Her unmitigated devotion for Lord Somnath glimmers her personality with ethereal light. With every breath, she is devoted to Him. She has no other interest in life but to dance in front of the Lord everyday with "Jaya Somnath" ringing in her ears. Describing Chaula's innocent countenance, Munshi remarks, "She was eighteen years old but had the figure of a girl of fifteen. Her face had the sweetness and simplicity of an eight year old child and her bright eyes had an innate earnestness." (p. 9)

In order to attain the status of the chosen bride of the Lord, she acquires excellent control over all her limbs and gestures; she controls her diet and her sleep, and keeps herself away from any man's touch. She is confident that Lord Somnath would be so pleased with her dancing that He would not wish to see anyone else dance before Him but her on every *ekadashi* day and every *shivra*tri that is sacred to Him. When Chaula prepares herself to dance for the first time in front of Lord Somnath, her excitement and exhilaration knows no bounds.

She dances with an appealing grace; her body moves in rhythm and harmony in the way Goddess Parvati's would have moved when she offered herself to Lord Shiva. Every limb of hers indicates her eagerness to be merged in the devotion to the Lord. Getting carried away by impulsive joy, she embraces the Nandi, the mount of the Lord. She loses control over herself.

Being overwhelmed by unbearable flood of joy, she sinks on the floor. Gang Sarvagna, the Head Priest of the temple, carries her to the door of the sanctum and implores Lord Shiva to accept her. He announces that as long as Chaula lives, she will dance before Him on every *Shivra*tri night. Chaula considers it to be the supreme day of her life. She murmurs, "I am yours, yours, in this life and in every other". (p. 26)

After the dance ceremony is over, Chaula stays in the temple for some time and then goes to the sea shore to have a dip into it. She looks amazingly beautiful as the rays of the moon penetrate her through the shimmering foam of the waves. As she floats, the sea appears to play with her as if she was a shell of perfect beauty, throwing her up and down gently and affectionately. Bhimdev, the King of Patan who follows her to the shore secretly, gets hypnotized to see the incredible beauty of Chaula. He starts gazing at her unremittingly, but his attention is suddenly distracted by the piercing scream of Chaula as she sees the frightful figure of *kapali*. She begins to shake with terror. Bhimdev catches hold of the neck of *kapali* with his strong well-muscled arms; a struggle ensues between the two; he throws the *kapali* into water; pressed his head into it, and leaves him dead and drowned.

When Bhimdev wades out of water, he looks at Chaula, lying on the ground unconscious. She looks like a withered white *mogra* flower. He gets bewitched by unfathomable beauty of naked Chaula. After a while she comes to her senses. Suddenly realizing that she is naked, she shrinks with embarrassment. She suddenly picks up her clothes and starts dressing her as quickly as possible. Bhimdev is amused at Chaula's concern about her clothes. Chaula is enticed by Bhimdev's frankness and his free laughter. She requests him to forget what he has seen. She emphatically says that she is not an ordinary dancer; she belongs to Lord Somnath. Bhimdev finds in her eyes only gratitude, and in her charming smile, no emotion other than devotion to God. Chaula shudders at the thought of what she has just gone through.

Chaula is an ardent worshipper of Lord Somnath. As time passes, she gets more and more engrossed in the

bhakti of the Lord. But a transformation is witnessed in her behavior. The memory of King Bhimdev overwhelms her. She incessantly remembers the moonlit night when he had saved her from the terrible *kapali*. Consequently when she receives the news of the arrival of Bhimdev in Patan, she gets so eager to see him that she climbs up to the tower on the roof of the temple to have a glimpse of him. The reminiscence of that unforgettable night fills her heart with so much delight that her soul craves to see that powerful face, with bright and attractive eyes who had arrived to save her Lord Somnath from the demon-like invaders. Bhimdev then goes to the temple where Chaula was dancing before the deity of Lord Somnath. Bhimdev without looking at the dancer calls out in loud harsh voice that the music be stopped. Chaula's song and dance stops abruptly, like the half-uttered words of a dying man. Gurudev announces that Mahmud of Gazni will arrive at Prabhas in eight or ten days. He entrusts all the authority of the abode of Lord Somnath to king Bhimdev who directs his minister Vimal to vacate the city of Prabhas in the shortest possible time. Also he commands to stop the music and dance in the temple till Mahmud is vanquished. Bhimdev looks at Chaula but he does not recognize her. This upsets her so much that she rushes towards home, throws herself on the bed, fully clothed and bejewelled. She starts weeping bitterly as her Lord has not recognized her. When Bhimdev announces that all the people of Prabhas should be shifted elsewhere since Mahmud is to strike Prabhas within few days, Gang Sarvagna commands Chaula to move away from Prabhas to reach a safe place. Chaula takes a step forward, loses her balance and falls unconscious on the ground. At this very moment, the memory of that moonlit night comes back to Bhimdev when he had first seen her face and her body. His heart leaps up and before anybody realizes what had happened. He stands up and lifts up Chaula in his arms and then gently puts Chaula in Ganga's lap. Once again Bhimdev's heart longs for Chaula and he wishes to make her his own forever. Chaula keeps thinking about Bhimdev all the time. She considers Bhimdev as the very incarnation of Lord Somnath.

"To think of him, to serve him, to wait on him, this had become the very breath of her life. Lord Shankar was getting ready to fight the demon Tripura; and she, Uma, the Consort of Lord Shankar, was there to serve him, to look for his comforts. (p. 206)

With the passing of every day, Bhimdev remains more and more occupied with planning of strategies against the probable invasion of Mahmud over Patan. Chaula often stands under the projection of the roof to watch Bhimdev returning back and then retiring to his room. On one moonlit night, as Bhimdev returns late, he goes for a stroll to the terrace after taking his dinner. As usual Chaula was standing to have a glimpse of Bhimdev. Just as Bhimdev was about to return to his room, Chaula makes a slight movement trying to hide herself in the shadow of a pillar. The noise startles Bhimdev. Chaula looks around; goes near Bhimdev and says, "Maharaj, I am your slave. Is there anything I can do to lighten your burden?" (p. 208) Bhimdev is highly moved. He finds Chaula very attractive in the moonlight. He utters in a voice pulsating with emotions, "Whenever I see you, my fatigue disappears." (p. 208) He then puts his strong hand on Chaula's shoulder; the passionate touch overwhelms both. Bhimdev pulls Chaula to himself and kisses her. Both gets entangled in each other's arms in such a way that neither Bhimdev nor Chaula remembers how long the embrace and the kiss lasted. When they separate, they feel that they had passed through the experience of supreme ecstasy.

As Chaula witnesses Bhimdev fighting valiantly against the enemy forces, she considers Bhimdev as Lord Somnath Himself fighting the great demon Tripura. She sees the Lord of all Gods, Shiva spreading terror among living creatures on Earth. She hears the rishis, the ancient seers flying in the Heavens and singing praises to the Lord. But while fighting with the enemies, Bhimdev gets fatally wounded. This was due to the treachery of Shivarashi who wanted to marry Chaula but fails in his purpose. When Gang Sarvagna brings the body of Bhimdev carrying on his shoulders, Chaula believes him to be dead. She starts crying bitterly and flings herself on his body. Gang Sarvagna tries to console her saying that the Lord's wishes have turned out to be different from their own. She is told

that the fortress will soon be captured and the Muslims will soon be here. Gang Sarvagna tells Chaula, "You are no longer Chaula, but the Queen of Patan. Lest any Mlechha touches you while you are alive, it now becomes your first duty to immolate yourself." (p 286)

Chaula is further informed that there is still some life in Bhimdev, but it could be determined after some time only whether he would survive or not. A funeral pyre is prepared for Chaula by Gang Sarvagna. Ganga anoints Chaula with sandalwood paste. Chaula goes to Lord Somnath and prostrates herself before Him. She then comes back to Bhimdev where he was lying unconscious. She moves his hair matted with blood oozing out from the forehead and gazes at his face. She herself looks like a corpse. Her face appears emotionless and her eyes look lusterless. She touches Bhimdev's feet and then prostrates herself before Ganga and Gang Sarvagna.

At this very moment, Samant comes running to them. He implores Gurudev to run away from there and informs him that the way to the sea was still open and a boat was waiting for them. Praising the bravery of Samant, Gurudev tells Chaula that it is Lord Shambhu's desire that she shall not die. Gurudev commands Chaula to go with Samant and asks him to take king Bhimdev along with him because if he lives, he will be able once again to install the Lord at Prabhas.

This incident once again leaves Chaula unnerved and her perception of life undergoes a sea change. She realizes the immortality of Lord Somnath. She feels that she has done a mistake by accepting a human being as her Lord. Her behavior takes a turn towards insanity. She keeps sitting in a listless manner and acts like a robot. Sometimes she sits by Bhimdev's side like a dumb lifeless creature. To anyone who sees her, she gives the impression of a person who has lost all vitality. Only when there is a talk of Lord Somnath, she listens with keen attention. Even when she is informed that Bhimdev would be taken to Kanthakot in Kutch, she remains unconcerned.

Chaula is moved to Khambhayat where she is kept in the royal fortress with pomp and honour due to king Bhimdev's queen. Yet she does not find interest in anything. She only sighs and mutters, "My Lord, My

Bholanath". She neither speaks nor weeps but sits motionless with her eyes fixed on the horizon. On one occasion, as Gaganrashi talks about dancing girls, Chaula interestingly inquires if the kind of clothes and ornaments she used to wear are available there. Gaganrashi answers in the affirmative. Next day, beautiful, gorgeous clothes and jewelled ornaments are brought for her. She looks happy and pleased. The palace servants are delighted to see their queen so happy for the first time. But this happiness also turns out to be short lived. For some days thereafter she stops speaking to anybody and just sits like a statue with her eyes fixed towards ocean. When it grows dark, she takes out her newly acquired clothes and ornaments and spreads them out on her bed and sits until midnight as if awaiting a call from someone. Getting disappointed, she sighs deeply and puts the clothes back into the box. Such abnormal behaviour of Chaula becomes her regular unalterable routine and becomes a much discussed topic among the residents of the palace. Gaganrashi as well as her attendants persist in their efforts to talk to her on new subjects in the hope that somehow something might arouse her interest. But no stories interest her. She merely stares vacantly and keeps mumbling indiscreetly.

Two months pass in this manner. Her desire to eat decreases day by day. She realizes that she has become pregnant. Instead of becoming happy, she feels deeply aggrieved and falls unconscious. After gaining consciousness, she cries incessantly as if she has done a heinous act. She feels that she is not Parvati and Bhimdev is not Lord Somnath. She thinks that she has betrayed her Lord by succumbing to momentary infatuation, by marrying a mere human being - and now she is going to be the mother of his son. Day and night she sheds tears over her folly. She continuously thinks that she is impure; she who has dedicated to Lord God has given herself to a mere human being and in consequence has become the lowliest of the lowly. Within her she carries the stigma of that despicable relationship.

A day arrives when Maharaj Bhimdev drives away Hammir out of Kutch and the whole city jubilates with joy. The village folk express their desire to meet their queen Chaula and share their happiness with her, but

she remains unmoved and disinterested. The thought of a child growing in her womb makes her more and more unhappy for it reminds her of fallen grace. She weeps continuously. Even Gaganrashi's medicines prove to be of no avail to Chaula. But the proposal of reconstruction of Lord Somnath at Prabhas delights Chaula and brings change in her. Her eyes regain her original lustre and cheerfulness. She asks Gaganrashi how long it will take to consecrate the image of the Lord in the new temple. She is informed that it would take about a year. Chaula expresses her desire to live as a new spirit is awakened within her. She now forces herself to sit and eat. Her eyes begin to regain some of their former brilliance. It is rumoured that king Bhimdev would soon come to see his Queen Chaula. The night before Bhimdev's expected arrival, Chaula becomes restless. In a dream, she sees Prabhas: her old and venerable Gurudev offering worship; her mother Ganga controlling the temple dancers, and herself dancing. In dreams, she reestablishes relationship with her Lord Somnath. She becomes His slave, sits on His temple steps, sings devotional songs and worships Him with *billi* leaves. Ultimately she succeeds in winning His affections and in ecstasy spends nights with her arms around His neck.

About midday, Bhimdev arrives in Khambhayat accompanied by five hundred soldiers. Everyone in the town is dressed in his best clothes to welcome the conqueror. In the balcony of the terrace, upon a jewelled seat sits Chaula dressed in her best clothes and surrounded by her maids. She looks frail and feeble. Her eyes are apparently fixed on the square in the fort but in reality they are longing to see her Lord Somnath. Her pale cheeks are flushed and her breath becomes faster. Chaula finds Bhimdev as youthful as Indra with his well-trimmed beard waving in the breeze. She sees in his eyes the pride of a conqueror and on his lips the smile of a monarch. As soon as Chaula turns her eyes away from him, a deep distress dwells in her eyes, her lips start trembling and she starts crying uncontrollably.

The moment procession halts, Bhimdev Maharaj rushes to Chaula like an impatient lover. Chaula looks at her husband with frightened eyes and softly utters *Maharaj*. Bhimdev is worried about Chaula's ill health.

He talks to her about his brilliant victories in the past full year. Bhimdev is so overwhelmed with emotion that he gives a warm kiss to her. Chaula feels the world around her wobbling and shaking. To her, "Bhimdev's face, the smell of his body, the soft touch of his scented beard, the passion in his eyes, seemed to belong to a stranger shockingly distasteful. With her eyes shut, shaking in every limb, she silently prays, "My Lord Somnath, why have You forsaken me? Why have You forgotten me?" (p. 301)

Chaula is shocked to know that the idol of Lord Somnath has been destroyed by tyrant Mahmud of Gazni. Tears roll from her eyes as Lord Somnath's image is smashed into pieces. A month later, Chaula gives birth to a son, heir-apparent to Bhimdev's throne. There is a great rejoicing in the whole of Gujarat. King Bhimdev is extremely happy to receive the news of the birth of his son. He hastily comes to Khambhayat, takes his son in his arms and generously gives presents to everyone in attendance on Chaula. Chaula is the most beloved wife and queen of king Bhimdev. Everyone is happy but the attitude of Chaula towards her new born son is dreary and devoid of enthusiasm. She feels shocked to see that the child has "the same broad chest, the same big eyes as his father's." (p. 305) She feels as if she has "seen a terrifying giant in an ugly dream." (p. 305) Since her life has been dedicated to Lord Somnath, she considers her child "a living reminder of her fatal lapse." (p. 305) After a period of two months, Minister Vimal comes to escort Chaula to Patan. She is carried in a palanquin to her husband king Bhimdev in Patan. She is taken to the apartment of royal palace reserved for the queens. Queen Udaymati, the first queen of Maharaj Bhimdev visits her and welcomes Chaula warmly. Everyone is anxious to satisfy even the smallest wish of Chaula. She steadily recuperates in Patan but the pomp and splendour of the the city disturbs her. She starts thinking of Khambhayat where there was at least an ocean and the distant horizon beyond which her imagination could locate Prabhas, the home of the Lord. In Patan, Chaula feels like an outsider, though outwardly respected by all. The thought that Chaula is neither a princess nor a Rajput but only a temple dancer overpowers her. She realizes that her place is

not in Patan but in Prabhas, in the shrine of Lord Somnath.

When Bhimnath goes near Chaula to embrace her, he finds her "transfixed like one hypnotised by a snake". (p 307) The blood drains away from her face and she screams loudly. Bhimdev asks Chaula the reason of this strange behaviour. She replies that the image of Lord Somnath has not yet been consecrated. Bhimdev pledges to construct a beautiful temple of Lord Somnath and consecrate the image of Lord Shiva with a great pomp and ceremonial splendour . He also promises to invite kings from all over the country at this magnificent occasion.

Chaula urges Bhimdev to send her to Prabhas where the work of construction of temple is going on. Bhimdev's heart fills up with grief, but since he is passionately attached to Chaula, he accedes to her wish. Chaula goes to Prabhas to supervise the construction of the temple of Somnath. She is accompanied by an army of servants - men and women. Royal physicians are deputed to look after her and the little Prince Kshemraj. Damodar Mehta, a great devotee of Lord Somnath is deputed to see her right up to Prabhas. The pious Brahmin minister is also anxious to see the construction of the temple done expeditiously.

When Chaula sets out on her journey to Prabhas, she is full of enthusiasm, but it does not last long. On her arrival at Prabhas, she finds that everything has changed and there is nothing like the abode of Lord Somnath as she knew it. As Chaula reaches the inner temple; she perceives in her imagination the great courtyard in which Ganga and Gurudev are preparing the fire for her to immolate herself. She finds that the inner sanctum is still under construction and there is just empty space where once stood the image of Lord Somnath. She casts her eyes about in sheer hopelessness and starts crying incessantly.

Chaula feels as if she is living in the land of ghosts. Nothing around her seems to be real nor anyone belongs to her world, none of the building seems to be hers. This Prabhas, she feels, is not the abode of her Lord. Her sole interest is focussed on embroidering her dancing clothes and sewing on them diamonds, pearls and rubies in wonderful designs and craftsmanship.

Beyond this life holds no interest to her. In the evening when it is time to offer worship to God, Chaula fondly spreads out the clothes and gazes upon them for long. Her only desire is to wear these beautiful clothes and dance before her Lord to please Him.

A drastic change in the attitude of Chaula is noticed by all. A stage arrives when she feels guilty for getting married and giving birth to a child. She firmly believes that because of her plunging into the worldly affairs, Lord Somnath will not come back. She starts behaving in an eccentric manner. She rolls on the ground as if she is mad and tears her hair and wails loudly announcing that she has become impure. Since she has become the wife of a mortal, her Lord has become angry with her and would never forgive her for this earthly act. She remains in despair all the time and often falls unconscious. As the day of the consecration of the image of Lord Somnath arrives, Chaula gets impatient. She shares her grief with Samant,

"I am a simple girl. My Bholanath will not forget me - cannot have forgotten me. He knows that I belong to Him, that I am the dust of His feet. He knows me as I am impure or pure. Chauhan, my brother, a new hope fills my heart today. I shall get peace at last. Since the morning, I keep hearing the sound of the bells around Nandi's neck... Today He will forgive me and take me back as I am." (pp 315-316)

The time of evening worship draws nearer. The sanctum appears more beautiful and larger than the old one and therefore the image of Lord Somnath is seen from the courtyard itself. It is anointed with sandalwood paste, covered with *billi* leaves, and looks extremely beautiful and fascinating. In the assembly hall, seats are reserved for ruling princes. At last Lord Somnath, eternal and omnipotent is consecrated in the temple. Everyone present stands up and sings in chorus the hymn of the evening prayer. Gagan Sarvagna shouts, "Victory to Somnath - Jaya Somnath." It is taken up by the assemblage gathered there and also by the crowd outside the temple. Gagan Sarvagna takes his seat and announces the beginning of the ceremonial dance. The dancer enters slowly with her face covered with a gold-embroidered

scarf. She starts dancing and the singers begin the classic episode in which Parvati woos the Lord.

The pace of the dance increases with the rhythm of the music; the dancer by her *mudras* shows picking up flowers, preparing a garland and taking a handful of *billi* leaves. She then approaches the door of the sanctum and offers worship to the Lord. The rulers become impatient to see the face of the dancer. The other girls stop singing as they are unable to understand what kind of uncommon dance is being performed. Only the drum continues with its rhythmic beats and the dancing girl's feet keep time with it. The whole assembly is soon hypnotized by this magnificent dance. The dancer with her gestures pleads to Lord Shiva again and again. She dances round and round Him in prayerful appeal. She dances with astonishing grace and beauty. She seeks to placate Lord Somnath and to ask His forgiveness. But she gets disappointed as she gets no response from Him.

She continues her effort to pacify Lord Somnath. In another effort, she pours the affliction of her heart. The sound of her anklets appears more like *convulsive sobs*. All the people present are moved to tears. The dancer approaches near the door of the sanctum in her last effort to please Lord Somnath. Her movements indicate that she is offering herself to Lord Shankar. Suddenly the movement of her dance slows down. The music also comes to a halt. The dancer bends low and suddenly gets up. It seems from her joyous movements that she has been able to appease Lord Somnath. She jumps in ecstasy and expresses her triumph. The music is resumed. The crowd now watches every movement in dead silence.

As the dancer makes one last triumphant gesture, the cloth that covers her face falls off. The pale but beautiful face of Chaula appears with the expression of ecstatic joy. Her brightened eyes are seen resplendent with love. Before the movement is over, she jumps towards the sanctum and places her head on its threshold. The drums stop. Chaula's head slides lifelessly from the threshold and she dies at the feet of Lord Somnath.

The poignant transformation of Chaula from King Bhimdev's devoted wife to her oneness with Lord Somnath moves the reader. Her unerring love for the

Lord drives her towards insanity. Her incessant effort to ask for forgiveness from the Lord and please Him by all means shakes her psyche. She forgets her very existence and accumulates all her power to gratify her Lord. Even though Chaula is married to King Bhimdev and is provided with all the material pleasures of life, her gratification sustains for a very brief period. Her innate passion to please Lord Somnath and to attain His blessings overpowers her. The final stage of Chaula's dance depicts her acceptance by Lord Somnath. Chaula's ecstatic joy is witnessed on her contended face when she breathes her last and worships her Lord with intense devotion in her heart. The expedition from *devadasi* to King Bhimdev's wife and once again assuming divinity and ultimately sacrificing the life at the feet of Lord Somnath is what Munshi has intended to reveal through the novel.

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