



THE MISTRESSES OF THE TIGER

Saturday, 25. March, 2017 – Bhoramdeo (India) Temple Garden

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The Vedas teach us that there is neither rebirth nor death, that the self is merely a breath, a sigh in the breeze, an imprint upon the sands by the sea. But even if we are merely a shooting star, a ghost, let's attempt to leave a mark, a trace – even if it be only a glint of dust on the edge of the path we traverse.

I stand in the garden of the main temple of Bhoramdeo, the outer walls of which bear reliefs, in large number, of couples in visibly ambiguous positions of lovemaking. Alongside them are carvings of masturbating, birthing, urinating and menstruating women. Many visitors come up and speak to me and wish to know if I find the temple beautiful and alluring and nod happily when they hear my stuttering answer: , «Oh, yes, very beautiful.» Nobody addresses the subject that is

graphically depicted in the carvings, though. At least teenagers must giggle. But they do not. Entire school classes traipse by the reliefs – and there is nothing in their behaviour that suggests that they have grasped the reference, the meaning, of the sculptures. Yes, at the wish of their teacher, a group of boarders-schoolgirls allows itself to be photographed with me in front of the pornos, but I am the only person whose eyelashes twitch.

The people who erected this temple in the 11th century had clearly wished to leave behind a mark, an impression, of what they had to say, but their point of view has no official standing in the current-day scenario. One can discuss this matter in greater depth, but that is something the country's psychologists, sociologists and historians can do quite adequately.

The selfie is certainly the most popular way to leave a mark. In India, too. Today, almost everyone in India has a mobile phone with which they can portray themselves, their aunts, their little brother and their best friend – with a temple or a statue, a shopping mall or a beach in the background. In addition, there seems to be an urge for portraits in traditional form: a desire for images that are of an formal nature, that are representational, especially as a whole apparatus is involved in their creation. The classical scenery portrait, common in 19th-century photography, still holds allure in India and is, as such, one of the conventional attractions in the fair.

The Boramdeo Temple, located far away from all major settlements in the sparsely populated eastern segment of the state of Chhattisgarh, usually sees very quiet days. At the end of March, however, a festival takes place here called Boramdeo Mahotsav. Nobody has been able to explain to me what it's all about. There is much loud music and dozens of stalls selling clothes and cosmetics, sweetmeats and juices, fried meats and minced meat, horoscopes and hocus-pocus. People flock to the grounds, ringing the bell in the Vishnu temple before settling down to savour the fair's delights.

In the grounds of the fair, various photographers offer their services to the teeming crowds. You can pose grand on a small throne, ride on a wooden elephant, or face the image of a waterfall. The biggest success, however, are four young men who have travelled with an almost life-sized plush tiger and floral arrangements of flowers. A huge number of women and girls can be seen queuing up here. The photographers have also brought along a lighting system and a generator that buzzes next to a well adorned with sculptures of deer. Under a tarpaulin two computers and several printers are set up on tables. While one chap positions, instructs and photographs the objects, two busily edit and print the pictures, while the fourth manages the process and collects the money. The quartet has chosen its location with utmost care. The customers stand in front of a bush hung with a few coloured garlands – a backdrop that exudes a real jungle atmosphere. They are framed by two flower stands and at their feet lies the tiger, docile and gazing somewhat ethereally into the evening sky.

There are indeed tigers in the area. Recently, about 90 were counted in the nearby Kanha National Park. That does not make this production with a large cuddly toy any less weird for me, though. In





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my view, people should react to such a situation, satirise the spirit of its theatricality, make fun of the artificiality of the situation. But everyone takes the matter bloody seriously and tries to look as good as possible, as dignified as possible: as if they are really princesses with a real, tame tiger lying at their feet. Apparently, these mistresses of the big cat are very aware that they are leaving a trace of themselves at that moment, creating an image even more valid than a selfie – even if only because it is organised by professional photographers and printed out on paper. But, how can it be that the ludicruity of the whole production plays no role here? Is there a po-

wer at work here like the one that allows people to see the pornographic temple reliefs without really seeing them?

We humans are but a fleeting glimmer in the firmament of the great whole. This is the suggestion put forth by the Vedas. I do not wish to judge whether they are right. But there is one thing I know, and that is the fact that we want to soar as a shooting star while raising some dust. That makes things complicated. But it makes them, at least in my view, highly interesting, too.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.