

THE HINDU MODE OF TRIBAL ABSORPTION AND THE STATE FORMATION DURING MEDIEVAL PERIOD IN SAMBALPUR

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Sambalpur may rightly be called the most pluralistic society. Besides being the seat of Buddhism and Hinduism it is also home to other religions and communities such as Muslims, Christians and innumerable indigenous tribal communities. With this multi-racial, multi cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-communal composition, Sambalpur has always chosen the path of social accomodation and social integration. The present paper is an attempt to understand how the indigenous communities and their religious traditions have played most significant role in the process of State formation in the erst-while Sambalpur kingdom during medieval period.

In Sambalpur, the ruling class was always well aware of the fact that communalism would weaken the state formation and would cause disharmony in social life and would divert the attention of the common people from formation of a separate Sambalpur kingdom. So, the indigenous communities were integrated into the larger Hindu society. Their deities were exalted and accepted by the ruling class of Sambalpur in order to appease the local subjects and also to consolidate their power as well as authority over the natives with their areas. Understandably, in the process of the building of an unified Sambalpur kingdom, indigenous communities with their religious traditions were successfully absorbed in the mainstream of the Hindu great tradition through its branches like saktism, saivism, vashnavism and various Hindu epics.

The area of our study i.e. Sambalpur is the headquarters town of modern Sambalpur district. It is situated on the left bank of the river Mahanadi. Sambalpur is an ancient town and it has the international reputation of being a *tantra pitha*. The existence of Sambalpur may be dated back at least to the early Christian era. The Greek Geographer Ptolemy (middle of the second century A.D.) in his book Geographike refers to a town named Sambalaka situated on the bank of the river Manada. Ancient Sambalaka and Manada are identified with modern Sambalpur and the river Mahanadi respectively (Panda, 1996:34; Mishra, 2003:87-90). the suffix 'pur' has been later added by sanskritising the original name Sambhal when the territory has come under the Chauhan rule (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:2-3). Similarly, Samlei pitha may be thought of much older and the deity may have been worshipped by the aborigines since time immemorial. By the time of medieval period, the land of Sambala i.e. Sambalpur was most probably a seat of tantric Buddhism.

Sambalpur is considered to be the land where the *Sambara tantra* was propounded by a famous siddha called Pitopada who is also regarded to have attained the siddhi of invisibility at Sambala (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:446). Sometime in the eighth century A.D., Indrabhuti was the king of Sambalaka. He is reputed as a patron of tantrik buddhism and also the author of the text the *jnyanasiddhi*. His sister Lakshminkara is reported to be a tantrik Buddhist perfectionist. She is thought of as one of the 84 *siddhagurus* in tantrik Buddhism and as the propounder of a religious faith called *Sahajayana*, thus making a great reputation for herself. In other words, Sambalpur may be suggested to have developed a high standard of tantrik culture and *Samlei pitha* is undoubtedly a part of that great cultural tradition. Thus, Sambalpur may be considered to be one of the important urban centre with international reputation in between the second and eighth century A.D.

Balaram Dev became the first Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur kingdom about the middle of the 16th century A.D. According to the prevailing tradition he discovered the image of Samlei beneath a *semel* (silk-cotton) tree. The botanical name of this tree is *Bomax Malabaricum*. Because of phonetic similarity between 'Semel' and 'samlei' some scholars give eredence to this tale that the deity worshipped beneath a 'semel' tree has come to be known as 'samlei'. As per the legend, the village Chaunrpur on the right bank of the river Mahanadi is said to be the seat of Balaram Dev, the first Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur Rajya, before his coming to Sambalpur. One day while hunting, Balaram Dev crossed the river Mahanadi. When he reached the left bank a beautiful hare appeared before him. Balaram Dev set his hounds at the innocent creature. But, the result was contrary to his expectation. After some time Balaram Dev found his hounds repulsed by the hare. It was a fine example of courage exhibited by the most timid of animals. Balaram Dev thought that there might be some supernatural virtue in the land. That night Samlei Devi appeared in his dream and said, "Why do you appear so sad? Don't think that there appears to have been a mistake. I am here. Worship me. Your expectations and hopes will be fulfilled." Next morning, Balaram Dev discovered the image of the deity. Thence, the Raja decided to build his gad/garh (fort) there. Having built a gad he installed in it the deity Samlei. The place where her image was set up was a kud (island) on which stood a semel tree and hence was called semel kud while the deity was given the name of Samlei. In all probability, Samlei has been sanskritised to Samaleswari in the reigns of Chauhans (pasayat, 1998:135-43; Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:2-3).

Be that as it may, identical stories prevail about origins of other places of Orissa like Cuttack, Talcher and Baripada. This story is also associated with the discovery of deities like Banibakreswari of Kuapada village under Delanga block in Puri district, Barala Devi of Balasakumpa village in Phulbani district. This is why it is difficult to locate the exact time and place of the origin of this myth (Pasayat, 2003:10-12). But, this story attests the fact that the aboriginal religious shrine like Samlei has received royal patronage. The establishment of Samlei Devi at Sambalpur may be about the year 1348-49 A.D. Raja Balabhadra Dev enshrined the deity inside his gad. During his reign the Puja-services

were provided from the royal treasury. In other words, state funding of the puja-services in the Samlei temple has been introduced since then. Subsequently, the present temple was built in the reign of Raja Chhatra Sai about the year 1691 A.D. Because, then it was perhaps in a dilapidated condition.

The most significant development in his period was donation of forty villages for the worship of Samlei. It means that recognised steps have been taken by the Chauhan rulers for the state funding of the Puja-services in Samlei gudi (temple) and she has been raised to the status of Rastra Devi and called Samleswari i.e. 'Tiwari' or reigning deity of 'Sambala' (Sambalpur). Unfortunately, however, the landed property assigned for the performance of daily and special pujas of Samlei Devi have been converted into personal property by the priests. This has been possible most probably during the British rule, either by hiding or destroying the copper plate grants. What these priests have done was contrary to the age-old prevailing tradition of this sakti pitha. Any how, the priests are managing now the puja-services of *Samlei gudi*. Reportedly, the temple has no property (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:548; Pasayat, 1998:138-9; Dash, 1962:227).

There is another tale which reveals that during the demolition of Hindu deities by one Kalapahada, the priests of Shri Jagannath temple, Puri fled with the images of the deities. They buried the images on the Mahanadi in Sonapur (Suvarnapur) which is situated to the south of Sambalpur. Kalapahada and his army followed the priests and arrived at Sambalpur where Samlei Devi prevented them from proceeding further. She assumed the form of a milk-maid and appeared before them. She offered milk and curd to the soldiers who were very tired and thirsty. Immediately, the soldiers consumed the milk and curd which spread desolation among them. At this hour, the army of Raja Balabhadra Dev of Sambalpur drove back Kalapahada and his army successfully.

It would not be out of context to mention here that identical stories prevail in other religious shrines of Orissa namely Chalhakhai Devi of Kulada in Ganjam district, Dahikhai-Chamunda Devi of Rambha in Ganjam district. Also this tale is associated with Danteswari Devi of Bastar district in the neighbouring state of Chhatisgarh (pansayat, 2003:20). This is why it is really difficult to identify the place wherefrom this story has been conceived and later adopted in other religious shrines. Though, the above story seems to have been created out of imagination only, we cannot ignore the social functions served by this story. Nonetheless, it has identified the supernatural power and deeds of Samlei Devi. It has established socio-cultural relationships between the aborigines and the caste-hindus. By assimilating such a story into samlei cult, the aboriginal people identify themselves as part of the larger Hindu religious culture, thus contributing to Hindu cultural unity at a higher level which has helped in the state formation in Sambalpur.

Samlei of Sambalpur is a shapeless rock made to appear like a face. It may be said to be a big piece of head-like stone structure. According to the oral tradition, Daksha arranged a Jajna. He invited all the deities and relatives to attend the function. But he did

not invite his daughter Sati and Son-in-law Lord Siva. Because his daughter Sati married Siva against the wish of Daksha. Yet, Sati went to attend the ritual ceremony where she was received with disgrace. As a consequence, Sati protested and accused her father for his neglect and disregard show to her husband. Daksha broke into anger and cursed Lord Siva as a beggar, ashman, yogi, king of goblins etc. Sati could not tolerate such insult and jumped into the Jajna Kunda. So, Lord Siva became furious and he started his tandava nritya bearing the corpse of Sati on his back. It was terrible and the destruction of the entire universe was imminent. So, Lord Vishnu came out to save the universe. He instructed his Sudarsan Chakra to cut the dead body of Sati into pieces. After the weight was gone and Lord Siva became conscious he was consoled by Lord Vishnu. Thereafter, Lord Siva retired alone to his abode Kailash. The body of Sati had been hewn into a number of pieces and wherever a fragment touched the earth a Sakti pitha sprang up. It is the head of Sati which is enshrined and worshipped in the Samaleswari temple.

Though mythologically the origin of this sakti pitha in Sambalpur is connected with the famous Daksha jajna story, originally it is not reported or recorded in any of the epic traditions of Hindu religion. There is no denying the fact that the image of Samlei Devi is a large block of stone. There is also a projection with a narrow groove in the middle of the stone image of the deity. This projection is believed to be the mouth of the deity. On both sides of the projection are depressions covered with beaten gold leaves which represent the eyes of the deity. Moreover, the image of the deity does not correspond with any of the forms of devi icon of Hindu iconography. Furthermore, the image does not resemble any other sakta goddess found in Orissa. There is a parsva-devata of Samlei called pitabali who is widely believed to be the deity of tribal people namely Kandhas (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:547). Thus, Samlei is apparently a non-Hindu deity originally worshipped by the aborigines of Sambalpur. Addition of Daksha Jajna story is believed to be a later development to add to Samlei some more dose of sanskritik elements. This may be case of localisation or parochilalisation of famous Daksha Jajna story to validate the faith of the aborigines with the Hindu epic traditions of India. By identifying Sambalpur with the incarnation of Sakti as Samleswari and her mythical and miraculous events the local people identify themselves as part of the larger Hindu culture, thus contributing to cultural unity and consolidation of Chauhan rule in Sambalpur.

There is another story which indicates the dietary nature of the deity Samlei. Once the priest had flowers and fruits on a plate and was offering prayers to Samlei Devi while his small daughter was standing by his side. The priest discovered suddenly that the deity had disappeared. Looking up, the priest found the deity devouring his girl child. Immediately, the priest threw the plate at the face of Samlei Devi. As a result of which the face of the deity turned to back side. So, the deity is facing away from the entrance and that is why there is no face on the front side. Interestingly, this tale with little variation is associated with the following religious shrines in other parts of Orissa namely Kanakadurga at piteipur village in Jagatsinghpur; Jaanlei Devi at Hinjilikatu in Ganjam and Kumari Devi at Bonai in

Sundargarh district. Also, the tale is associated with Chandrahasini Devi at Chandrapur in Billaspur district of the state of Chhattisgarh (Pasayat, 2003:19). All the same, the meaning of the tale is important for our purpose. This tale is meant not only to frighten children away but also suggests the practice of blood sacrifice and influence of tantra on this religious shrine.

As per the oral tradition, once upon a time human beings were sacrificed before Samlei Devi. It is said that once a Siddha arrived at Sambalpur. Priests of Samlei Devi caught him for sacrifice before Samlei. The Siddha told the priests to leave him alone before the deity inside the temple. Accordingly, the siddha was not beheaded and left alone and alive before Samlei. He was very calm. He was not found nervous or frightened before the deity. The priests completed the rituals and closed the doors of the temple. The event went contrary to the interest of the priests. Next morning, the siddha was discovered alive and unhurt in the temple. Thence, the practise of human sacrifice was stopped and buffaloes were sacrificed before her. Now-a-days, buka (he-goat) and cock are common sacrificial objects during Durga puja, Chaitra purnima and other occasions in this Sakti pitha.

Samlei Devi is worshipped by the non-brahmin priests belonging to Sahara caste. They are generally considered as untouchables in the social hierarchy of this area. In villages, Samlei as village deity is worshipped by the Jhankars. Though the Jhankars do not belong to any particular caste, they are in fact non-brahmin priests who also worship other village deities called Mauli, Budhima and Grampati. Earlier, Jhankars were granted rent-free lands in the villages. All these combinedly indicate that Samlei has the character of a non-hindu deity. Most probably, the rulers intended no hurt to the sentiments and feelings of the aborigines. In view of this, it may be suggested here that Saktism has taken all care to adopt and preserve the features of the aboriginal or local religious cult i.e. Samlei. In other words, many local communities with Samlei tradition of erst-while Sambalpur kingdom have been deeply attracted towards and absorbed in the mainstream of the pan-Indian Hindu cultural tradition through saktism. The saktism coupled with saivism has formed the centre of integration of Indian civilisation and has a great influence on the regional religious Sambalpuri culture.

A very important aspect of the development of the religious system in Sambalpur region during the medieval period is the introduction of tantrik elements in worship. Historical and archaeological remains attest the fact that Sambapur region has been a stronghold of saivism and saktism coupled with tantrik religion. The typical shapeless rock made to appear like a face with two gold leaves in the form of eyes, and in the middle a projection resembling the mouth of a cow, severe practice of blood sacrifice etc. suggest some influence of or connections with tantra. As it is discussed earlier, Sambalpur as well as Samlei pitha may be identified with an important seat of tantrism where a high standard of tantrik culture has been developed during the Buddhist and pre-Chauhan period. But, thereafter, particularly during Chauhan period the unique blend of saktism, saivism, tantrism and sanskritik or brahminical culture has rose to a new height in Sambalpur region.

Most probably, the Chauhan rulers have brought their own faith with them. But they have not enjoined on common people of this area to believe and follow their faith and worship their deity; rather they have reckoned their own faith with that of the locality. It was not what they practised and worshipped, but what they felt under what they believed that was important. The Chauhan rulers have taken all care to retain the primitive character of this pitha like aniconical image of the deity, non-brahmin priests of the deity, blood sacrifice etc. By constructing a temple, they have introduced elaborate rituals in a systematic manner. By giving rent-free land grants to the temple they have ensured regular puja-services for the deity. Also, they manufactured myths wherever required to identify the deity as a Hindu goddess. In all probability, they have carefully followed this principle under political expediency with a view to please the local subject.

In the context, mention may be made of Ashpuri Devi who is the tutelary goddess of the Chauhan rulers all over the country. Ramai Dev, the first Chauhan ruler of Patna rajya has identified as Pataneswari in Patna (Patnagarh) meaning 'Iswari of Patna' (presiding goddess of Patna). Since then Patneswari has been the tutelary goddess of the Chauhan rulers of Patnagarh or Patna-house. Similarly, Balaram Dev has established Sambalpur kingdom. He has also exalted the local deity Samlei as Samaleswari meaning 'Iswari of Sambala (Sambalpur) and the king has accepted her with his own tutelary goddess. Thus, the local name of the deity i.e. Samlei has been Hinduised to Samaleswari. According to this name, She is the deity of all who reside in Sambalpur. In other words, the deity represents a larger society wherein people of various ethnic backgrounds stay together. Thus, the deity has become the source and symbol of unity and integrity mainly between the aboriginal people and caste-Hindus in Sambalpur.

It may be believed that the Chauhan rulers have made it their principle to esteem and extol the deities of the aborigines or natives wherever they have established their kingdoms and expanded their territory. The tribal deity Samlei has been hijacked by the ruling classes of Sambalpur from the tribal people and used as a tool to exercise their authority and control over the latter. Not only Samlei of Sambalpur but also Astasambhus in different parts of erst-while Sambalpur kingdom namely Bimaleswar at Huma, Balunkeswar at Gaisama, Kedarnath at Ambabhona, Biswanath at Deogaon, Maneswar at Maneswar, Swapneswar at Sorna, Bisweswar at Soranda and Nilakantheswar at Niljee are adopted and given royal patronage in the reigns of Chauhan rulers. Temples are constructed for these deities and elaborate rituals are introduced. Rent-free lands and villages are granted and regular puja-services of these deities are ensured. This fundamental principle has made them very popular among the local subjects and has helped them to expand, consolidate and strengthen the Chauhan rule in Sambalpur region. In other words, this principle has aided to a great extent to the success of their long reign over this region.

It may be noted here that Pataneswari temples are found at only few places like Patnagarh, Balangir and Sambalpur whereas the number of Samlei gudi is quite large in

this area. Besides the Samlei gudi situated at Sambalpur, Barpali and Sonapur (Suvarnapur), the deity occupies a pivotal position in the religious life of the common people of this area. She is commonly worshipped under a tree in the form of a stone in the vicinity of almost each and every village of this area. This indicates the extent of reverence shown to Samlei in Sambalpur. In villages, Samlei is worshipped by the Jhankars who enjoy rent-free lands for his service as noted elsewhere. Moreover, many indigenous, aboriginal, native, local, folk or tribal communities with their religious traditions of Sambalpur area have been successfully absorbed in the mainstream of the hindu great tradition through saivism, saktism, vaishnavism as well as hindu religious epics and helped in the process of state formation during medieval period in erst-while Sambalpur kingdom.

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