



Shakti Cult in Orissa

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The worship of the deified form of female energy or principle which is called Shakti in our religious terminology is traced back in the Indian history to the pre-Vedic Indus Valley Civilization. On Orissan context, some scholars trace the worship of Shakti in the form of Viraja at Jajpur to the pre-Christian era on the basis of certain references to this deity in the Mahabharat, Hari Vamsa and Vayupurana. But Shakti worship at Viraja, the ancient place-name of Jajpur, was overshadowed by the predominance of Buddhism for some centuries preceding the Gupta era. With the efflorescence of the Brahmanical religion in the Gupta period, the Shakti worship at Jajpur assumed new importance. The present image of Viraja in the temple at Jajpur belongs to the fifth century A.D. This image, called Mahisamardini, is a two-handed Durga, engaged in killing the



buffalo demon. The two-handed image of Mahisamardini is the earliest form of Goddess Durga. Besides Jajpur, an image of this type has been found at Somesvar near Kakatpur of the Prachi valley. In first half of the seventh century A.D., Hiuen Tsang noticed a large number of Deva temples in Orissa. Some of the temples must have been places of Shakti worship.

During the early Bhaumakara rule, the Durga image became eight-armed. During the later Bhaumakara period this image is found to be ten-armed. The ten-armed Mahisamardini images of the Prachi valley are assigned by the scholars to the tenth century A.D. The Dasabhujia or ten-armed

Durga was depicted as a war Goddess, armed with weapons of different Gods like Siva's trident, Vishu's disc, Varuna's conch, Agni's dart, Yama's iron rod, Vayu's bow, Surya's arrows, Indra's thunder bolt, Kuvera's mace, Brahma's rosary and



pot, Viswakarma's sword and Himavan's lion. Though the early Bhaumakara Kings were Buddhists, Shakti worship flourished at Jajpur, their capital, all through the Bhaumakara rule. The popularity of Shakti worship at Jajpur is borne out by the fact that the Bhaumakara queen Tribhuvan Mahadevi compared herself with Katyayani (Durga or Viraja) at her accession.

During the Sailodbhava and Bhaumakara periods the deification of female energy was conceived and executed in various ways. The image of Siva was accompanied by that of his consort Parvati. Deification of female energy was also introduced within the framework of Saivism, because Siva was conceived as Ardhanariswar (half-male and half-female).

The most important factor contributing to the popularization of the worship of mother-Goddess during these periods was the growth of Tantricism from seventh century A.D. The Tantriks worshipped the mother Goddess as the source of power or Shakti and the giver of the highest spiritual bliss. From seventh century onwards Tantricism continued to dominate Buddhism, Saivism and Brahmanical religion.

The Buddhist Tantricism, called Vajrayan, conceived of the Goddess Tara (Saviouress). Tara images have been found in such places as Banapur, Vanesvaranasi, Ratnagiri, and Khiching.

During the Bhaumakara period the Tantrik Shakti worship dominated Bhubaneswar, the great centre of Saivism. The Kapalikas who were the devotees of Siva worshipped the Tantrik Goddesses, Chamunda and Mahisamardini, for the attainment of Siddhis. Four Shakti shrines were erected on four sides of the Vindu Sarovar tank, near the Lingaraj temple. Of these four temples Vaitala, Mohini, Uttaresvar, and another unnamed-Vaitala is the most important. The presiding deity of Vaitala temple is Chamunda. Chamunda is

terrific looking deity, with sunken belly, emaciated body, bulged eyes and garland of skull, seated on a corpse, and flanked by jackels. The name Vaitala is derived from Vetala, the spirit whose help the Kapalikas and Tantrikas sought for the attainment of Siddhis. In the Vaitala temple strange Tantrik rites like human or animal sacrifice were being practised. In front of the temple, the basement of a stone Yupa which was used for sacrificial purposes is found. In the inner wall of this temple, a fierce image of Bhairava is found.

Chamunda was a deity worshipped by the Buddhists, Saivites as well as Tantrikas. Apart from the Vaitala temple, a prominent centre of Chamunda worship in the Bhaumakara period was Khiching.

The Shakti worshippers of the Bhaumakara period conceived of worshipping a group of seven mother Goddesses, called Saptamatraka. The seven Goddesses are Varahi, Indrani, Vaishnavi, Kaumari, Sivani, Brahmi and Chamunda. These seven Goddesses were accompanied by Ganesha and Virabhadra. The Saptamatraka images have been found at Jajpur, Belkhandi (in the district of Kalahandi), near Markandeya tank of Puri, Salanpur (Jagatsinghpur P.S of the undivided Cuttack district) and in the Parasuramesvara, Vaitala and Muktesvar temples of Bhubaneswar. Dr. K.C.Panigrahi has discerned some iconographic differences between the Saptamatrukas of earlier period (Sailodbhava and Bhaumakara) and those of the later period (Somavamsi period). The later Saptamatrakas, such as the image found in the modern temple of Dasasvamedha Ghat of Jajpur, Markandeya tank image (which is attributed to the Somavamsi ruler Bhimaratha in the Madala Panji) and the image of Salanpur hold babies in arms. The seven mothers with babies in arms were designed to symbolically deify the maternal affection.



Like Chamunda, Varahi, one of the seven mother Goddesses, was worshipped independently. Varahi temple is found at Chaurasi village of the Prachi valley (in the Puri district) and Narendrapur in the Balasore district. The Varahi image of the Chaurasi temple which is assigned to the tenth century A.D. is a colossal image, seated on a crouching buffalo, holding a fish in right hand and a skull in the left hand. By worshipping Varahi, people sought to ward off pestilences. The Brahmanical Tantricism developed in the form of a cult, called Yogini cult. According to Kalika Purana, Orissa was the land where the female Tantrikas just as the Kapalikas were the devotees of Lord Siva, Yoginis were the devotees of Shakti or Durga. The Yoginis and Kapalikas lived in spiritual as well sexual intimacy for the attainment of spiritual bliss. The Yogini temples contain Shakti, i.e. a deified form of female energy as the presiding deity, and contain as many as sixty four manifestations of Shakti. In Orissa two Yogini temples of Bhaumakara period are found. The Yogini temple of Hirapur, near Bhubaneswar, is presided by the ten-armed figure of Bhairava and a four-armed Ajaikapada Bhairava. This temple contains sixty three images, symbolizing the different manifestations of Shakti. The presiding deity of the Yogini temple of Ranipur-Jharia (in the district of Bolangir) is a terrific Chamunda. This temple possesses forty manifestations of Shakti. This was situated within the territory of the Somavamsis of Kosala.

During the Bhaumakara rule, the Sulki rulers worshipped a mother-Goddess in the form of a pillar Goddess called Stambhesvari.

The Somavamsis were Saivites. During their rule the worship of Shakti or Tantricism did not suffer from any negligence due to the close relation between Saivism and Tantricism, i.e. the cult of Siva who is known as Bhairava and that of His female consort who is called Bhairavi, Shakti, Parvati, Durga or Mahamaya. But the Ganga rulers extended their patronage to Vaishnavism and showed no interest in Tantrik cult. Chodagangadeva was antagonistic to the Shakti worship. But the worship of Shakti did not disappear; it assumed a new form. In the temples of Ganga period the Dikpalas or guardian deities appear with female consorts. The Gangas built the temple of Parvati inside the Lingaraj temple compound. They also built the temples of Lakshmi and Vimala inside the compound of the Jagannath temple at Puri. During the Ganga period the deification of female energy entered into Vaishnavism. Jayadev, the twelfth century poet, introduced Radha as the consort of Krishna. The Tantrik cult adjusted itself within the pantheon of deities at Puri or Shreekshestra during the Ganga and Suryavamsi rules. The Bata Avakasha of Balaram Das, the poet of early sixteenth century A.D. tells us that Jagannath is attended by sixty four Yoginis, Katyayani, Saptamatruka, Vimala and Viraja. The Bata Avakasha mentions seventy six mother Goddesses. The worship of Shakti or mother Goddesses continues to prevail in different parts of Orissa under different names.

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