



Mother Goddess and Her Worship in Orissa

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Indian Mother Goddess popularly known as Durga is variously worshipped in India. But the root is to be found in the concept of Durga as the goddess of vegetation and fertility. According to the scholars the Navaratra ceremony of Devi Durga is nothing but a harvest festival. In Western India, various kinds of grain are worshipped in honour of the Mother Goddess, and she is invoked to enter the seedlings which are worshipped and finally thrown into water. In Uttar Pradesh special agricultural rites are performed on one of the *Navaratra* days. The tribal peoples such as the Oraons, Bhuiyans and Kols too believe in the Corn Mother and sacrifice chickens and pour a libation of wine on the corn field after the harvest or before the sowing season. In Kashmir and Punjab, during the *Navaratra*, plants of barley and wheat are placed in the earthen pot and offered to the Mother Goddess. In South India, the Goddess is conceived as residing in seeds and plants and worshipped as *amma* (cf. Skt. *amba*) or mother.

The worship of *Navapatrika*, which is an important aspect of Durga worship, clearly shows that the Goddess is concerned with vegetation. The *Navapatrika* consists of nine leaves or plants; Rambha, Kaccvi, Haridra, Jaanti, Bilva, Dadima, Asoka, Manaka and Dhanya. Each of the plants is associated with goddess; Rambha with Brahmani, Kaccvi with Kalika, Haridra with Durga, Jayanti with Kartiki, Bilva

with Siva, Dadima with Raktadantika, Asoka with Sokarohita, Manaka with Camunda and Dhanya with Laksmi (of *Matsyasakta* quoted in *Pranatosani*, V). The nine Goddesses presiding over the nine plants are tied up with an Aparajita creeper, bathed in a tank or a river, and then worshipped independently. Thus in the Durga worship, a very close relation between the Mother Goddess and the vegetation may clearly be observed.

Another aspect of the Indian Mother Goddess is to be found in her different epithets like Himavati, Girija, Sailasuta, VindhyaVASINI, Mandaravasini etc. which clearly point to her association with the hills. This reminds us of an episode narrated in Kenopanisad where she is described as an abstract goddess who imparted *Brahmavidya* to India. But it is difficult to say whether Uma of the said work is same as that of the *Kumarasambhava* or of the *Puranas*. Scholars ascribe the names such as Parvai and Durga to Himavati of the *Upanisad*. The *Puranas* mention several mountain resorts of the Mother Goddess. According of *Devipurana* she lives in the Himalayas as Siva, in the Vindhya as Mangala, in the Malaya mountain as Nanda, in the Kiskindhya hills as Bhairavi, in the Kola mountains as Mahalak, in the Sahyadri range as Kalaratri and in the Gandhamardana hills as Amba. In Orissa there is a beautiful Oriya poem in praise



of Mother Goddess popularly known as *Mangala-Stuti* which enumerates the numerous shrines of the goddess in Orissa each having a different name of her and worshipped in that name such as Viraja at Jajpur, Samalai at Sambalpur, Sarala at Jhankada, Vimala at Puri, Charachika at Banki and Bhattarika at Baramba, and so on.

The name Uma appears to be of non-Sanskritic origin, the derivation of which is not met with anywhere. Kalidasa in his *Kumarasambhava* gives a curious derivation which is obviously not based on usual practice of deriving a word (cf. *u=ma* of *Sarga 1 Sloka 26*). The word *ma* or *amma* in the sense of mother is found used in various parts of the world. The Babylonian word for mother is *Umma* or *Uma*, the Accadian *Ummi*, and the Dravidian is *Amma*. These words can be connected with each other and with *Uma*, the Goddess was also conceived as dwelling in Mountain. Thus Uma, resembles the mountain Goddesses of other countries not only in form but in name as well.

The epithet Sakambhari again of the Mother Goddess suggests her familiarity with vegetation and fertility. But her association with the mountain not only suggests the world of vegetation but also her ferocious nature which is noticed in her character as the destroyer of enemies with her deadly weapons. Here she appears as the Goddess of War vanquishing demons for the sake of gods. This feature is absent in the conception of Parvati-Uma who belongs to the benign group of Goddess. The terrible group is represented by such Goddessess as Chandika, Kali and others. These two independent stream later united into one, and the conception of Durga, benign and terrible, is composite one which may have served the purpose of bridging the gap.

Regarding the goddess as Mahisamardini *Kalika Purana* describes an episode which is briefly as follows :

"In olden times, in the period of Manu Svayambhuva, in the beginning of the first age of men, the great Goddess, the Yoganidra Mahamaya, Supporteress of the Worlds, in whom the worlds are contained, was constantly praised by all the gods with view to the annihilation of demon Mahisa, through desire for the welfare of the living beings; being provided with sixteen arms, she became famous by the name of Bhadrakali.

She appeared in the northern shore of the milk ocean, a mighty figure with the luster of the flax blossom, with earrings made of flaming gold, adorned with long twisted hair and with three diadems together with the crescent being provided with a snake as a necklace and adorned with golden necklaces;

She continually held trident and a discus and a sword, a conch- shell, and an arrow. A lance and a thunderbolt and a staff in her right arms; the Goddess was splendid through her radiant teeth; she continuously held a shield, a hide and a bow, a noose and also a hook, a bell and an axe (and) a mace in her left hands; She stood on the lion, flaming violently with her three eyes which were of the colour of blood, keeping on to pierce Mahisa with her trident and to tread upon him with her left foot, she, the Supreme Lady, in whom the worlds are contained."

Elsewhere the same *Purana* describes the Goddess in the name of Durga with almost the same characteristic features. The demon Mahisa obviously representing the predominance of animal instinct propitiates her and chooses a boon, for being worshipped along with the Goddess in the form of Durga. The Goddess readily grants him the boon saying :

"When you have been killed by me in the fight. O demon Mahisa, you shall never leave my feet; In every place where worship of me takes place, there (will be sorship) of you; as regards your body, O *Danava*, it is to be worshipped and meditated upon at the same time."



Durga in the shape of *Mahisamardini* sometimes with two arms, sometimes with four arms, sometimes with six arms, sometimes with eight arms, sometime with ten arms and rarely with twelve arms is worshipped in several *Pithas* in Orissa.

Tantra seems to have been very popular right from the pre-medieval days in Orissa. With the help of *tantra* goddesses were worshipped. Thus many *devipithas* were converted to *Tantrapithas* in Orissa in course of time. During the rule at Bhauma kings the influence of *Vajrayana* was felt in the rituals. The animal sacrifice and even human sacrifice were taken resort to for fulfilling one's desire. Anointing the body of the worshipper with the sacrificial ash was the usual practice. The *pancha-makara-sadhana* gained momentum in the matters of worship.

The image of the goddess Durga having two arms and as *Mahisamardini* is to be found in Viraja temple at Jajpur. This image is pretty old and goes back to the early phase of Vajrayana culture. Here the goddess holds the tail of Mahisa with her left hand. With her right hand he holds the raised sword. Viraja of Puranic fame belongs to this place. Here the practice of animal sacrifice was in vogue for a pretty long time. But this has been discontinued in modern times.

In Jajpur on the bank of the river Baitarani an interesting image of *Saptamatrka* holding a baby in the lap is to be met with. The worship of *Saptamatrka* is said to be prevalent in Orissa right from the time of Sailodbhava kings.

Another famous Mother Goddess is Vimala Devi in the Sri Jagannath temple. Here the goddess is four armed and in a standing posture. The practice of sacrificing buffaloes and goats here was once upon a time very popular, but it was gradually discontinued in favour of Vaisnavism as the Lord Jagannath is conceived as Visnu. At present, only at the time of Durga

Puja in the midnight of *Mahastami* a goat is sacrificed behind the temple premises and offered to the goddess. It is interesting to note that a famous Sanskrit treatise styles Vimala as Bhairavi and Jagannatha as Bhairava.

Mother Goddess in the name of Bhagavati is famous at Banapur where she is in the shape of *Mahisamardini* Durga with eight arms. The human sacrifice was practised here in early times. Now it has been stopped but the sacrifice of buffaloes and goats at the time of Durga puja is still in practice here.

A very interesting feature of Mother goddess is noticed in the image of Goddess Sarala at Jhankada. The well known Oriya poet Sarala Das is said to have attained the glory of writing poetry by propitiating this goddess. He has described the greatness of the goddess by paying high tributes in his *Mahabharata* and *Chandi Purana*. This goddess, though eight-armed and *Mahisamardini*, holds a book and a lyre unlike others and thus combines both Durga and Sarasvati. She is dressed in three different postures at three different periods in a day - in the morning a virgin, in the noon a grown up lady and in the evening an old woman. Her imposing natural beauty inspires devotion among one and all at the very sight of her. The mode of worship prevalent here is also tantric in nature.

Another two famous shrines in Orissa are : (1) the temple of goddess Bhattarika at Baramba and (2) that of goddess Charchikai at Banki both in Cuttack district. Here also the worship follows the *tantric* way. The prachi valley abounds in relics of *Devi pithas* which again point to popularity of the worship of Mother Goddess obviously patronised by the Orissan rulers from time to time.

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