



Cult of Varahi in Orissa

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Varahi, one of the Mother Goddesses, a manifestation of 64 Yoginis and the counterpart of Varaha-Vishnu was created to annihilate the powerful demons like Chanda, Munda, Sumbha, Nisumbha, Raktavirjya and the *tripuravijayi* Mahisasura. The goddess Varahi associated with the other mothers-Brahmani, Maheswari, Koumari, Vaisnavi, Indrani and Chamunda assisted Ambika in her combat against the demons. Since she is linked with other mother goddesses, her origin is also associated with them. Worship of the goddess in her individual form has been prevalent in Orissa and other parts of India.

Similar to other gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon her origin is traced from the *Puranas*, the last great authority of Indian religion. The *Skanda*, *Markandeya*, *Matsya*, *Devi*, *Brahmavaivarta*, *Devi Bhagabata*, *Varaha* and *Linga Puranas* have lucidly narrated interesting

legends of Matrikas' origin, their iconographic features, and their role in the religious life. These *Puranas* record the names of numerous *Matrikas*. But the seven mothers have been accepted universally, supported by the iconographic texts.



Varahi, Samlei Temple, Sonepur

The antiquity of the worship of the mother goddess is traced from the Indus Valley Civilization (flourished in 4th/3rd millennium B.C). In fact, the worship of Siva and Sakti in the Indus Civilization is proved by the archaeological treasures unearthed from excavations at Harappa and Mohenjodaro. While speaking about the religion of the Indus people, Sir John Marshall (the famous archaeologist and the excavator of the sites) remarks that Sakti worship was of great antiquity in India; it originated out of the mother goddess and was closely connected with the cult of Siva. The continuity of the Sakti cult since then till the beginning of the historic



period is attested by the stray finds and excavation at Rajghat, Rugar, Kausambi, Pataliputra and in the south has retrieved remains pertaining to the Sakti cult. The epics particularly the *Mahabharata* highlighted the *Sakta* principle. The two *Durga stotras*, one chanted by Judhithira and the other by Arjuna in the form of eulogy are considered basically the genesis of Mahadevi-Durga manifestation, which was fully reflected in the *Puranas* and *Upa-Puranas*. On the basis of iconographic conception as recorded in the *Puranas*, the manifestations of Sakti were carved in sculptures and worshipped in the temples.

Of the numerous Puranic legends, I touch upon in short, a few of them to signify the importance of the Sakti in different forms. The *Makandeya Purana* (compiled in the 4th century A.D.) relates that the *Matrikas* were created by Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, Indra, Kartikeya etc. to fight the demons as the assistants of the Mahadevi-Durga. Particularly the demons like Chanda, Munda and Raktavirjya were endowed with quality of multiplying into demons equal to themselves in strength and prowess no sooner their drops of blood oozed out from the wounds touched the ground. To kill the demon Raktavirjya, Siva created from his energy the goddess Yogeswari and similarly the other major gods created Saktis from their energies. It was with the assistance of the *Matrikas* Mahadeva was able to kill the demon Raktavirjya. This story is recorded in different forms in other *Puranas*. The account of the *Matsya Purana* runs that when Siva discharged his Pasupata weapon against Andhaka demon, numerous demons of similar stature sprang up from the drops of blood gushing out of his body. In order to assist him in the combat Siva created as many as 132 goddesses of formidable countenance, who drank all the bloods of the demon finally killing him in the battle ground.

Thereafter, the ferocious goddesses started their campaign of destroying the whole universe. Having no other alternative to subdue the goddesses Siva prayed to Narasimha who appeared instantly with his claws besmeared with the blood of Hiranyakasipu, his tongue flapping out like the spark of electricity, with the formidable fangs sparkling like a thousand Sun. He created 32 *Matrikas* who were more terrible than the goddesses created by Siva. The earlier mothers asked to stay in different parts of the world and look after the human beings and animals as their children. This indicates various manifestations of the Sakti conceived iconographically and were propitiated. To highlight each of them *Upa-Puranas* and interesting legends were composed.

It is pertinent to note that the *Matrikas* were created as the war goddesses iconic forms. They are seated at ease either in *Lalita* or *Yogasana*, associated each with a child on the lap (except Chamunda who is seated in *Rajalilasana*) and flanked below by their respective *vahanas*. They bear forms and cognisances of their male counterparts. According to the *Markandeya Purana* these are the female counterparts who are armed with the same weapons, wear the same ornaments, and ride the same *vahanas* and carry the same banners as the corresponding male gods do. Accordingly Brahmani should be sculpted like Brahma, *Maheswari* like Maheswara, Vaisnavi like Vishnu, Varahi a short-statured women with the face of a boar (like Varaha-Vishnu), Indrani like Indra, Koumari like Kumara (Kartikeya) and Chamunda created from the 3rd eye of Mahadevi represents a skeleton in appearance-flesh dried up, bones and sinews shown through the dried skin, eyes sunken and abdomen contracted, with hairs shooting upwards in the shape of flames tied with snakes, with the tongue and teeth protruding out, wearing a garland of skulls, and a tiger skin,



sitting on a deadbody flanked by an owl or vulture and jackals drinking blood dropping from the severed head of the demon.

According to the iconographic features Varahi has the face of boar and colour of the storm cloud. She wears on her head a *karandamukuta* and is adorned with ornaments made of corals. She weilds the *hala* (plough) and the *sakti* and is seated under a kalpa tree. Her *vahana* as well as the emblem on her banner is the elephant. To this description *Vishnudharmottara* adds that she has a big belly. According to this authority she has six hands, in four of which she carries the *danda*, *khadga*, *khetaka* and *pasa*. The two remaining hands being held respectively in *abhaya* and *varada* poses. The *Purvakarmagama* relates that she carries the *saranga dhanu*, the *hala* and the *musala* as her weapons.

Leaving aside the iconographical references we have the archaeological treasures of the *Matrikas* from the Gupta period. The Gangadhar stone inscription of Kumara Gupta speaks of the *Matrikas*. In the chronological sequence the inscription of the early Chalukya ruler, we come across the names of seven mothers. The *Matrikas* appeared in the sculptural representation throughout India. In the succeeding period the Sakti cult became so prominent that the Mothers appeared in the mainstream of Indian religion in some form or other.

Orissa became a prominent centre of Saktism in Eastern India. According to the *Hevajra Tantra*, the Sakta-Tantrism flourished in four major centers of India-Uddiyana (Orissa), Purnagiri, Kamarupa and Jalandhara. The *Kalika Purana* (11th century A.D.) emphasizes that the first Brahmanical tantric *pitha* in India originated and developed in Odra Desa (Orissa), the presiding deities of which were Jagannatha and the goddess Katyayani. The archaeological

evidences prove the prevalence of Shaktism in Orissa from the Gupta period, Viraja being the earliest Sakti goddess (in Mahisasuramardini form). The earliest group of *Sapta Matrikas* is sculpted in the Parasurameswar temple (7th century A.D) of Bhubaneswar. The images here are seated in *Yogasana* flanked by Ganesa and Virabhadra. The next in order of chronology comes *Matrikas* of Vaital temple (8th century A.D). Here the images beautifully sculpted bearing the art tradition of the Bhaumakaras. They are all seated in ease in *Yogasana*. They are not associated with the child. Chamunda is the presiding goddess locally known as Kapali. Dr. K.C. Panigrahi referring to the grim atmosphere created in the dark cella of *Khakhara* (Vaital) temple and a stone *yupa* in front of the temple suggests the prevalence of Kapalika form of worship in the temple. Chamunda was the presiding goddess of the Kapalika sect of Saivism. It is interesting to note that in Orissa a separate order of temple known as the *Khakhara* was erected in honour of a form of the Sakta deity. The Vaital shrine is the earliest shrine of this order. We have in Orissa as many as thirteen extant *Khakhara* temples in different stages of preservation. No male deity was ever enshrined in such temple. We have a separate Silpasastra in regard to this type of temple along with the temples of Rekha and Pidha order.

Varahi in the group of *Matrikas* in the Vaital temple is a sow-faced deity holding a fish and an axe in her two hands. She may be identified as Matsya Varahi. The ceiling of the Mukteswar temple (C. 10th century A.D) contains a set of *Saptamatrikas* on an eight-petalled lotus, each petal having a *Matrika*. For the first time here we find the association of a child each (except Chamunda). Child was perhaps associated with the mother from about 10th century onwards. All



other *Matrikas* set to be discussed in the succeeding pages are linked with children.

Contemporary to this group there is a set of *Saptamatrikas* on the edge of the Markandesvara tank in Puri town (assignable to the Somavamsi period) and the *Saptamatrikas* of Sathalpur near Jagatsinghpur town. Facing to the temple is enshrined a beautiful image of Ajaikapada Bhairava in a separate structure signifying the tantric aspect of the *Matrikas*. The association of Bhairava with the *Matrikas* reminds us of the concept of *Sakta Pithas*. There is a set of *Saptamatrikas* in the front façade of the Simhanath temple near Vaideswar (in Cuttack district) on the river Mahanadi. Here the *Matrikas* on the door jamb flanked on either side by Ganga and Yamuna is a novel feature in Orissan architecture. The *Saptamatrikas* of Khiching in the district of Mayurbhanj are beautiful pieces of art of the Bhanjas. Chamunda of the *Matrika* group is worshipped as Kichakesvari, the tutelary deity of the Bhanjas. The other *Matrikas* are preserved in the Khiching museum. At Belkhandi in the district of Kalahandi there is a group of *Saptamatrikas* (only lower portions are available) belonging to the early Somavamsis ruling from Sirpur (now in Chhattisgarh).

The Orissa State Museum preserves four beautiful *Matrikas* from Dharmasala. From the point of view of artistic imagery these are the best images so far discovered from Orissa. These images may be assigned to the late Somavamsis or the Gangas. Similar in style and workmanship are the two sets of *Matrikas* at Jajpur. The *Matrikas* of colossal stature kept in the compound of S.D.O's residence are by far the biggest sculptures of this order in India. In broken stage they look terrific, but elegant. Another group of *Matrikas* (seven) is enshrined in a modern structure on the Dasasvamedha ghat on the Vaitarani.

In the door lintel (now detached) of the Durga temple at Shergarh in the district of Balasore we come across in miniature form a set of *Saptamatrikas* flanked by Ganesa and Virabhadra. The temple is of *Khakhara* order assignable to 9th century A.D. A set of dancing *Saptamatrikas* is engraved in relief form in a part of the door jamb now preserved in the Balasore Museum. The workmanship of the images is of low order indicating their execution in a period of decadence.

Yoginis are basically the *Matrikas*. The 64 Yogini temples at Hirapur near Balkati and at Ranipur Jharial in Balangir district contain the images of some *Matrikas*. The above survey relates the prevalence of the cult of *Saptamatrikas* in Orissa. Of the seven *Matrikas*, Varahi and Chamunda became very popular in Orissa as their individual manifestations are found in different places.

A life-size image of Varahi (6 ft. 1 in. high and 2 ft. 9 in. wide) is enshrined in the temple of her name at Chaurasi in Prachi valley. She is in perfect state of preservation. Seated in *lalitasana* on a cushion placed on a plain legged seat with her hanging right leg resting on a life-like crouching buffalo, the figure holds in her right hand a fish and in the left a blood-cup. Decked in finger rings, anklets, valayas, armlets, two kinds of necklace, large ear studs and a tiara over the hair which rises upwards in spiral coils, the three-eyed deity is pot-bellied and is clad in a *dhoti*. The plain halo is oval, and the back side of the figure is cut out of the oblong back-slab. The temple enshrining the image of Varahi comes in the order of *Khakhara* and bears resemblance to the Gouri temple at Bhubaneswar. On stylistic ground the temple and the image are assignable to the early part of 10th century A.D. In the *Jagamohana* of the temple are seen two loose sculptures of Varahi



seated in *Maharajalilasana*, having a skull cup and a fish in two hands. The other is four armed holding in the lower left a skull cup, in the upper left a rosary, a water-pot in the lower right (upper left broken) associated with the mount buffalo and kneeling devotee. These two images were probably enshrined in some other temples in the locality.

An image of Varahi (3' 6" by 2' 2") in chlorite stone, two armed, seated in *Maharajalilasana* holding a fish and a wine cup is enshrined in a modern temple in the village, Bonchuo in Anandapur Sub-Division of Keonjhar district. She is worshipped as a *pitha devi* and is considered as important as Tarini of Ghatagaon. A colossal sculpture of Varahi (in broken state measuring 8 ft. in height) at Narendrapur of Bhadrak district is the biggest image in Orissa. Narendrapur of Bhadrak district is famous for Patani Mangala who is enshrined in a modern temple built by the Raja of Kanika.

Orissa has the distinction of having a shrine of Panchavarahi at Satbhaya. Out of five one is lost and is replaced by an image of some other goddess. All the existing four images are of the same stature, seated in *Rajalilasana* holding a skull-cup and a fish each. Stylistically these sculptures are assigned to C. 11th century A.D. J.N. Banerjee is of opinion that the cult of Panchavarahi flourished only in Orissa as no other such shrine is seen anywhere in India. The images are locally named as Batakumari, Panchurai, Vimalai, Kamalai and Janjali. This shrine has no history but is associated with a legend. Initially the goddesses acted as the protectress of the forest clad area in the previous Kanika state.

People of the locality were not aware of them. The deities while wandering in the forest thought the way to receive homage from the people. They caused blazing fire in the jungle at night. People were terrified to see such unusual fire continued for days together. The Raja of Kanika was informed of the happening. At last under the orders of the king the jungle was cleared. Surprisingly the fire extinguished. The goddesses told the king in a dream to worship them. A temple was constructed and worship was introduced. However, this is a very important Sakta-tantric centre of Orissa.

An image of Varahi (two armed holding a fish and a wine cup) is worshipped in Balisahi of Puri town. Her workmanship is bold and similar in style to that of Varahi of Chaurasi.

The above survey reveals that Varahi not only flourished with the Saptamatrikas and 64 Yoginis but also rose to eminence as an independent cult. Most of the individual images of Varahi were carved and installed during the Bhauma cultural epoch (736-940 A.D.). This cult alongwith other Sakta-tantric cults developed with the spread of Tantrism. It was during the Bhauma period Saivism, Saktism and Buddhism were amalgamated with tantrism resulting in creation of gods and goddesses of tantric character based on the *Tantras*.

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