



Stambhesvari Cult in Orissa

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Stambhesvari, the Goddess of the Post or Pillar, is one of the famous formless autochthonous deities widely worshipped in the hill tracts of south and western districts of Orissa. She also goes by the local colloquial name of Khambesvari. She is worshipped as a manifestation of Sakti in the forms of wooden posts or pillars and also through stones. She was the tutelary deity of some ruling dynasties like those of Tushtikara, the Sulkis, the Bhanjas and the feudatories of the Somavamsis like Ranaka Sri Jayarnnama in the early mediaeval period. The antiquity of the Stambhesvari cult may be traced back to 5th century A.D. Since then the cult of Stambesvari alias Khambesvari is wide spread and popular particularly in western Orissa and the Ghumusar region of South Orissa. She is still the presiding deity in most of the villages of Ghumsar, Boudh, Sonapur, Angul, Talcher and Dhenkanal regions¹ which consist mostly of hill and forest tracts.

Stambhesvari was originally an aboriginal Goddess worshipped by the non-Aryan tribes of hinterland Orissa. In course of time she was like many other tribal deities given a place in the Hindu pantheon. She was adopted and worshipped by the Aryan invaders who had settled amidst the non-Aryan tribes.² Subsequently she was transformed from a nomadic cult to Sakti cult. Gradually when the Aryan chiefs established small kingdoms of their own they had to depend upon

the sturdy tribals for the consolidation and the defence of their newly established kingdoms. The Aryan kings also needed the lands of different tribes and their services for promotion and extension of peasant agriculture which would yield enough surplus crops to meet the requirements of the increased civil and military personnel. Thus the kings were dependent upon the support and the loyalty of the tribes. Therefore, they kept them in good humor through the gradual process of inclusion of tribal groups into the Hindu caste system and the absorption and adoption of some aspects of the tribal religion and culture into the Aryan fold. Pargiter had observed that 'the Aryans met with the religious practices and beliefs among whom (the tribes) they ruled over or came into lasting contact with, and have assimilated some of them gradually thus modifying their own religion to a certain extent'.³ In this process the dominant tribal deities like Stambhesvari were Aryanised and patronized by the kings as their tutelary deities. Patronage of the dominant autochthonous deities enabled the kings to consolidate their power and its legitimation in the Hindu tribal zone of the hilly hinterland of Orissa.⁴

In this process of Aryanisation the Brahmanas who were granted rent free lands in the tribal area, played an important role. They settled in the forest tracts through land grants and came into contact with the forest tribes which



resided in the dominion of the Aryan kings.⁵ The Brahmana defined and codified the duties of the tribes which were to lead a recluse living in the forest and serve their king in various ways.⁶ Prof. R.S.Sharma has rightly stated that " the significance of land grants to Brahmanas is no difficult to appreciate. The grantees brought new knowledge which improved cultivation and inculcated in the aborigines a sense of loyalty to the established order upheld by the rulers."⁷ The coexistence of Brahmanical and tribal cultures led to the inter-action between these two.⁸ So much so the deities like Stambheswari worshipped by the non-Aryan tribes entered the Brahmanical pantheon.⁹ It may be mentioned that the hill tribes who believed in matriarchy were worshippers of Sakti.¹⁰ Stambhesvari is also worshipped as a manifestation of Sakti in the hill tracts of Orissa or atleast in tribal surroundings. Stambhesvari is the best example of the aboriginal goddesses of Orissa which underwent the process of Aryanisation in earlier times.

The first royal patron of Stambhesvari was Maharaja Tushtikara. He ruled over the Kalahandi, Sonapur, Boudh and Ghumsar regions in the 5th century A.D. These regions cover the hill tracts of western and southern Orissa. The earliest reference to Stambhesvari is found in the Teresinga copper plates¹¹ of Tushtikara. In this inscription Tushtikara has styled himself as *Stambhesvari Padabhaktah*. The inscription reveals that Maharaja Tushtikara in order to cure his ailing mother Sri Sobhini, worshipped at the feet of Goddess Stambhesvari, the *Istadevi* of his family.¹² At Aska in the Ghumsar region of the Ganjam district there is a temple of Stambhesvari, locally called as Khambhesvari, on the bank of river Risikulya. It is interesting to note that some of the place names occurring in the Teresinga plates have been located by S.N.Rajguru¹³ in the Aska region. In view of this it may be suggested that the Goddess Khambesvari at Aska was

enshrined at first by Tushtikara in Circa 5th century A.D.

Stambhesvari was also the tutelary deity of the Sulki dynasty (Circa A.D 600-900) of Kodalaka Mandala, corresponding to the present Dhenkanal-Angul-Talcher region, a tribal belt. All the Sulki rulers have combined their names with that of their tutelary deity. Their names end with the word *Stambha*, such as Kanchanastambha, Ranastambha, Kulastambha and Jayastambha. In their inscriptions¹⁴ the Sulkis claimed to have received their kingship in their capital Kodala and achieved success and prosperity through the grace of Goddess Stambhesvari. Thus in the Dhenkanal plates¹⁵ of Kulastambha we come across the phrase *Stambhesvari Labdha Vara Prasadah*. Similarly in the Puri plates¹⁶ of Ranastambha we find mention of *Stambhesvari Datta Vara Prasadat*. Ranastambha in another of his copper-plate Grants¹⁷ is said to have received boons from Stambhesvari (*Stambhesvari Prapta Vara Prasadat*). Stambhesvari is declared as the witness (*Sakshini*) of the Dhenkanal Grants¹⁸ of Ranastambha. The Sulkis were most probably the members of the Saulika tribe which according to the Brihatsmhitā and Markandeya Purana lived between the Kalingas and the Chedis (of Dakshina Kosala). Therefore, it is quite obvious that the rulers of the Sulki dynasty had acknowledged and royally patronized the dominant autochthonous Goddess of their own region, the Stambhesvari, as their tutelary deity.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the worship of Stambhesvari is widely popular even at present in the Dhenkanal, Angul and Talcher regions, once ruled by the Sulkis. Stambhesvari shrines are found at Barimul near Badamba, Bamur and Taras near Angul, which is not far from the capital of the Sulkis. Khambesvari represented by a simple stone or wooden post is worshipped in the cultivating season in different villages in the Angul region by the *Dehuris* belonging to the Kondh tribe or the Suddha caste,



a caste of tribal affiliation. This worship is named *Kaduali Puja* (Worship of the cultivating season).²⁰

In the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. the Bhanja dynasty of Khinjili Mandala corresponding to the present Sonepur-Baudh-Phulbani and Gumsar region, a predominantly tribal area, patronized Goddess Stambhesvari. In their copper plate grants like the Taspakera plate²¹ and Singhara copper plate²² of Ranaka Ranabhanja. The Bhanja kings have been said to have received boons from Goddess Stambhesvari (*Stambhesvari-Vara-Labdha*).

The Kamalpur copper plate grant²³ of Ranaka Shri Jayarname, a feudatory of the last Somavamsi king Karna Deva (Circa A.D. 1100-1110) records that the donor Jayarname received boons from Khambesvari (*Shri Khambhesvari Vara Labdha Prasada*). This is the first inscription in which the Oriya word Khambesvari is used for the Sanskrit *Stambhesvari*. It is significant to note that the Somavamsis who were staunch Saivites showed tolerance towards the Khambesvari cult worshipped by their feudatories.

From the middle of the 13th century a branch of the Bhanja dynasty ruled over Ghumsar in the Ganjam district till its occupation by the English in 1835 A.D.²⁴ Ghumsar is a region inhabited by the non-Aryan tribes like the Kondhs, Kuis and Savaras. The Bhanjas of Ghumsar patronized Khambesvari worshipped by these tribes. They made liberal grants to the worship of Khambesvari at Aska which was regarded as the presiding deity of the southern gate (*Dakshina Dvara*) of the Ghumsar kingdom. One of its rulers, Dhananjaya Bhanja (C. 1636-1702 A.D.) renovated the Khambesvari temple at Aska.²⁵

It is suggested²⁶ that the representation of Stambhesvari was probably made out on a *Stambha* (pillar) indicating a Siva Linga. Such a

Linga with the representation of Sakti is no doubt found among the sculptural remains of eastern India.²⁷ It should, however, be pointed out that whatever might have been the form of the Goddess worshipped in the early medieval period, the deity is at present worshipped by different castes under the Prakritic name Khambesvari in the form of the post or pillar of wood or stone without any reference to Siva Linga.²⁸ The stone posts representing the Goddess have been anthropomorphized and converted into images which are worshipped in open space under the bushy groves or under a tree on the road sides or hutments in the middle of the village or in its close vicinity. Some images are also worshipped in temples. Animal sacrifices are offered to propitiate this Pillar Goddess. Tradition asserts that human sacrifices were also made in the past to this Goddess. The priests of the Khambesvari shrines, both male and female, are not Brahmins. They are affiliated to different tribal groups. The male priests call themselves Sudra Muni, Muni, Jani, Mali, Dehuri, Devata, Raula etc. The female priests are generally called Janiani and Majjani. The Puja is performed in some shrines everyday and in some others only once in a week or in a month, preferably on a Tuesday, Thursday or Saturday. It is believed that Stambhesvari protects human being, cures diseases, ascertains fertility and confers every form of mundane benefit.

The Khambesvari temple at Aska in the Ganjam district is famous among the shrines of the autochthonous deities of Orissa. It is regarded as a *Sakta Pitha*. An interesting legend²⁹ of this temple says that once Goddess Khambesvari appeared in a dream before Khambamuni who lived in the forest and desired that she should be worshipped by the latter. As per the stipulation of Khambamuni she lived in his hut as a daughter. But this unfortunately caused suspicion among the people passing through the forest by the side of



the hut about the old man living alone in the company of a young girl. Khambamuni was very sorry to know about this and one fine morning to save himself from defame revealed the true self of the girl, who (the Goddess) convinced the people of the truth disclosed by Kambamuni by miraculously disappearing from the spot. From thence forward she made a lot of fun and frolic with her foster father, such as she would purchase bangles and met the old man pay for it and frightened the old man by her sudden appearance before him holding in her arms a baby cut into pieces. At last the old man lost his patience and out of annoyance slapped her as a result of which her face turned to one side. After this incident she declared that her childhood play (*Balya Lila*) or disguise was over, that her foster father (Khambamuni) would die and that she would be worshipped on the spot, i.e. in the forest by the tribal people. Thus the legend accounts for the affiliation of the tribals to Goddess Khambesvari. The feature of the baby cut into pieces conveys the idea of human sacrifice or at least tantric practices associated with the Goddess.

The Goddess Khambeswari at Aska is worshipped both as an image in the Garbhagriha and as a wooden pole presiding over the sacrificial pit in front of the main image opposite the main door of the sanctum. The main image consists of a stone pole which has been anthropomorphized by the addition of a disk as head. She has a slightly carved nose and mouth, while her three eyes and the protruding tongue are made of gold. There is a thick layer of pasty vermilion on her face painted from time to time. She has been adorned with gorgeous silken dress and heavy gold ornaments. "Her image confers both the impression of real Hindu image, whose body and limbs are mostly not to be seen because of the dresses and ornaments and the impression of the pole, whose form is still evident in spite of the dress".³⁰ The

priests of the temples are Sudras, who have tribal origin. In the past the priests were known as Sudra Munis. But the present generation of Priests prefer to call themselves as Muni only, omitting the term Sudra apparently with a view to make their tribal or low caste origin less known so as to alleviate their social status. Animal sacrifices are offered to Khambesvari on festive occasions like the *Dasahara* and the non-vegetarian *Bhoga* cooked by the Sudra priests is taken by all the devotees irrespective of caste. Wooden posts representing Khambesvari are also found at many places among which the one at Gandharadi near Baudh is famous. The wooden posts are renewed every ten years and the ceremony of the renewal is known as *Dasandhi* which is like the *Navakalevara* of the Jagannath trinity images. In the Jagannath shrines making of images out of wood has continued to be a practice. Stambhesvari also continues to be carved in wood at some places of western Orissa since time immemorial. Some scholars³¹ have linked Khambesvari with Subhadra on account of the similarity in their iconography and iconology to a certain extent and stated that the Hinduised iconography of Khambesvari might be taken as the proto-type for the development which led to the figure of Subhadra, which is worshipped with the *Bhubaneswari Mantra* (Sakta Mantra) in spite of her appearance as a Goddess of the *Vaisnava* pantheon.

Thus Stambhesvari is one of the best examples of the autochthonous Goddesses of Orissa which underwent the process of Aryanisation in earlier times. Having no specific iconographic features nor appearing in Brahmanical all Indian theology of the society in whose contact the tribes lived.³² As a link between Hinduisation and local tradition Stambhesvari has played a significant role in the folk religion of Orissa.



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