



Tradition of Shakti Worship in Orissa : Sarala in Perspective

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Indian sub-continent has been an ancient and ideal melting-pot since time immemorial. So many streams of faith, so many facets of culture have merged and mingled themselves in it. There are innumerable moments of crisis in Indian history when such forces have posed real threat to the very life and continuance of Indianness or Hindutva. But this blessed land has exhibited its incredible resilience and thrived in the face of such assaults and threats.

Notwithstanding all crises and threats India has maintained itself as a predominantly Hindu state with all its liberal and secular base. Again, among the myriad creeds and isms that Hinduism itself boasts of, Shakta as a creed remains popular and powerful. Shakti-worship is a major and a dominant faith among the Hindus. The Shakti-worshippers are, as it were, basically from the Sadhaka community. They worship Shakti, the wife of lord Shiva. All their faiths, rites and rituals are popularly known as Shakta Dharma. This has a very ancient tradition in Orissa. As per the Brihat Samhita, the manifestation/ appearance of Ekanshankara between Krsna-Balaram marks the beginning of the shakta tradition in Orissa (Dr. B. D. Mohanty. History of Oriya literature. Vol. II P. 354). There are very strong and ample evidence that Shakti worship was there in India as early as the pre-Vedic age. As the evidences are galore among the ruins of the excavation (of the Indus Civilization), Shakti-worship was popular and dominant in those ancient days. Down the ages,

it has been the initiative of the suffering millions to invoke the Goddess to relieve them from the torture and atrocities of some evil force. We get umpteen examples to prove this from the Puranic literature.

As the literary historians believe, it is the wonderful fusion of the creed and life-style of the Aryans and the post Aryans that created a faith in and perpetuated the tradition of Shakti-worship in this sub-continent. As a matter of fact, during the tenure of the Bhaumakara dynasty the popularity of Shakta religion or Shakti-worship reached an all time high and its epi-centre was the Biraja Kshetra of present Jajpur. (P.K. Mishra. Evolution of Orissa and Her Culture, 74). Even till as late as 15th century Shakti-worship maintained its popularity as the Mahabharata of Sarala Das so often projects. At many points and on many occasions poet Sarala Das calls goddess Sarala as Durga, Aparna, Parvati, Narayani, Bhavani, Katyayani, Saraswati, Chandi, Bhairavi, Bhagavati, Mangala and Hingula etc.

As Sarala Dasa writes,

"Along the river there is a ferry-point- Parsuram by name over there you see a hamlet called - Kanakavati close to that is a village called - Sarala And there manifests Herself mother Maheswari - as Sarala Chandi. She is the gretest yogin and the most - perfect Vaistnavi. She gives away boons and maintains he meditative - stature

(Sarala Mahabharata, Adi Parva) : Translation :
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We can see through Sarala's writings a clear impact of the pan-Indian Shakta tradition. Sarala, as we see, frequently calls out mother Sarala as Chandi, Maha Yogeswari, Parama Vaisnavi and Maheswari etc. The Devi Durga of Chandi Purana is treated as Prajna Paramita or the Goddess of knowledge in the Buddhist scriptures. Initially Prajna Paramita had two hands. But in course of time she got four, six, eight and finally ten hands (Dasa Bhujas). This proves the pan-Indian character of Shakti-worship. The Sapta Matruka (seven mothers) as we find in Jajpur and at many places was once upon a time the deity of the Buddhists. In fact as the matter stands most of the deities are now being worshipped by the Hindus were originally being worshipped by the Buddhists.

To look at it from the angle of religion, all the ancient poets have given adequate attention to the fundamental issues like Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha in their works of art. And in the process, they voice the spirit of their time in their works.

The age of Sarala is known for its open popular revolt against the rigid and atrocious Brahmanic rituals and culture. At the same time a strong reaction was also built up against both the modes of Buddhism, Natha Dharma and Tantra Yana. Besides, this period also significant by marks its preoccupation with the consciousness of the Pinda Brahmanda Tatva. Notwithstanding that, there is a clear trend which facilitates the thought and consciousness of shakta worship during this period that gets unmistakably manifested in Sarala's works and ideas. We would like to focus on that in this dialectic precisely.

Generally speaking, the Sadhakas who worship the Goddesses (Druga, Kali, Mangala etc) are broadly known as Shakta. As we see, poet Sarala has expressed his gratitude to mother Sarala for the inspiration that he got to compose the epic and other writings. As he candidly confesses :

I have no learning as
I am ignorant from birth
Nor do I know any mantra,
whatever she gives me I write
under the Kalpabata.

(Sarala Mahabharata, Kalpabata).

This amply indicates how much poet Sarala was indebted to Mother Sarala and he was basically an inspired poet. In the poet's vision mother Sarala is the possessor of all power and all knowledge (Mahavidya). She is again Maha Saraswati and the prime source of all knowledge and power. We get ample evidence of the poet's devotion and commitment to the Goddess from his works like Chandipurana, Vilanka Ramayana and Mahabharata. In one of the discourses on the mystery of creation in the great epic Mahabharata, there is an elaborate and exhaustive treatment of Shakti Upasana. The poet writes so lucidly and with such clarity the very beginning of creation thus :

Out of the Vacuum (Maha Sunya)
There came the wind,
From the wind
The power (Sarala Mahabharata,
Sava Parva)

Although Sarala's Chandi Purana or Septasati Chandi, this text is acknowledged as an important contribution to Shakta Dharma and Shakta worship. Besides featuring the arrival of Goddess Durga and the killing of demon Mahishasura, Sarala's Chandipurana makes special mention of the Goddesses who are popularly worshipped in Orissa such as Ugratara, Mangala, Chamana, Sarala Chandi, Maheswari, Tripura, Vasuli, Barati, Hingula, Tarini, Ambika, Charchika, Kamala etc. Further, poet Sarala mentions in Chandipurana how all the sixty-four yoginis are born from different parts of mother Durga like Narayani coming out of the sweat of the mother, Dakeswari from her shouts, Chandrakanti from her naval, Kamala from her



chest, Bikarali from her womb, Kankali from her finger etc. Presently all the sixty-four yoginis are being worshipped in Ranipur Jharial of Orissa. This gives a powerful indication about Sarala's strong inclination towards Shakta Dharma. In his epic the Mahabharata Sarala gives an interesting episode on the worship of Sapta Matraka. Even now Sapta Matrukas are being worshiped in Jajpur Town, the famous Biraja Kshetra under the erstwhile undivided Cuttack district. It would be an under statement if we simply say that poet Sarala was a Shakta worshipper. As a matter of fact, Sarala had profound knowledge in the intricacies of Shakta philosophy and the related original scriptures.

If we examine Sarala Mahabharata we find the poet dealing with the Shakta philosophy quite often whenever he has got an opportunity. That reminds us of the ethos and the mood of the period that gave a place of eminence and distinction to Shakta religion through many other creeds prevailed around the same time. We may recall, in this context, poet Sarala's effort to trace the previous life of Draupadi in the Mahabharata. As the Mahabharata mentions Draupadi who was born out of fire through, in her previous birth she was Ketuka Chandi. This version is exclusively that of poet Sarala which reinforces the belief that he was a champion and a promoter of Shakti worship. In the Mahabharata Vyasa presents an exciting session in which he himself (as the narrator) gives the account of the previous life of Draupadi to king Drupada. Again, in the vicious open parliament of the Kauravas, (in the context of Draupadi's humiliation) the sage Agasti is found narrating to yet another giant Vaivasuta Manu the four incarnations of Draupadi.

Four incarnations that Draupadi does take,
Ketuka being in the first,
Parvati being her second,
She is born in the home of Dakshya, in the
third, and in her fourth she is the daughter of
Drupada. (Sabha Parva P. 511)

In one of the deluges/ Pralayas (known as Kruta Sarva) lord Narayana was in his deep meditation. He was in his ananta Sayana posture upon a serpent called Virala Chakra. That was the time when there was no sign of heaven, earth or the nether-world, not even the Sun, the Moon, or the wind was born. Lord Narayana was deep in His Yoga Nidra with His head on the crown of the serpent. The only other presence around the lord was mother Adi Shakti who was serving him. Whenever the spell of lord Narayanas' Yoga Nidra would break for a moment the lord's glance of nectar would instantly create fifty Brahmas from the deep Blue Ocean. Once it so happened, one of those Brahmas started flirting with Goddess Saraswati (Adi Shakti) who was in the full-bloom of Her youth and beauty. When Adi Shakti stared at those Brahmas an extremely beautiful daughter was created. When the former asked this girl "ke tu" (who are you?) her name became ke tu ka. When this baby girl asked for food Saraswati (Adi Shakti) commanded her to kill all the Brahmas. Ke tu ka struggled for fourteen thousand years to kill fourteen Brahmas and ate their flesh and blood. And she started chasing the rest of the Brahmas to kill. To save their lives, all those Brahmas started calling out to the lord to save them from ke tu ka. And just on time the lord's spell of yoga Nidra broke and He took the Brahmas in and protected them for the time-being. It was so desired by Him that ke tu ka would eat them only in Dwapara Yuga. And those Brahmas would take their birth as Dushasan and ke tu ka as Draupadi in the age of Dwapara.

Further, it was so ordained that Dushasan would drag Draupadi with her lock of hair and attempt to strip her off. And to avenge this, Bhima, one of Draupadi's five husbands, would ampute the arms of Dushasan and paint the forehead of Draupadi with Dushasan's blood. At that moment Draupadi would be contented by taking her bath in the blood of Dushasan and drinking that too.



Not in Dwapara alone, in Tretaya too Draupadi's incarnation has been spelled out. In this age she would be born as the only daughter (Ekavala) and doing her perance on the bank of river Malati. Goddess Gayatri would be visiting that spot. Her husband Swami Niranjana Purusha was closely following Goddess Gayatri in the form of five bulls. Seeing this, Ekavala Parvati started suspecting the chastity of Goddess Gayatri. For this Kapila (the mother of Gayatri) cursed Parvati that she would be marrying five husbands in her next life as Draupadi.

In her third incarnation, Draupadi was born as Sachee and was married to Indra. It so happened one day Maharishi Twasta felt slighted in the court of Indra as the latter failed to receive him with due respect. He promptly asked Maharishi Vrutta to worship Rudra and to grab the throne of Indra. Eventually Vrutta Rishi threw the Indra out and occupied his place in Heaven. But again, with the assistance and grace of Lord Narayana once again the Indra could reclaim his position by killing Vrutta rishi. At this turn of event Maharishi Twasta got wild and rushed to Heaven to kill Indra. When Indra got this terrible news (from Narada) he was panicked and found a way out. He split himself into five parts; the first he got fused with Dharma, the second with the wind, the third with the space, the fourth with Aswini (the divine physician of the Heaven), and the fifth with Kumar (Kartikeya). After splitting away his soul into five different segments, Indra sat on his throne with the dross body, and soon Maharishi Twasta came and burnt Indra into ashes with his curse. On the death of Indra his wife Sachee sat on the bank of Akas Ganga and wailed. Lord Shiva and mother Parvati were passing that way when they heard the wailing. Sachee, seeing mother Parvati, entreated her "please give my husband back, mother" and the latter was merciful enough to bless Sachee saying "Thou shalt have five husbands". Sachee was crest fallen and was shell-shocked to hear that. But mother Parvati

promptly explained to her that in Dwapara Yuga she would be born as Draupadi and marry Indra (whose soul has been split into five) who would be born as five Pandava brothers.

That precisely explains the story of Ketuka being reincarnated as Draupadi in Dwapara. As we see, Draupadi, as a character, plays a major and decisive role in the epic the Mahabharata. The humiliation of Draupadi in the open Parliament of the Kauravas becomes the immediate cause of explosion that moves the existing bitterness between the two hostile Camps to a disastrous war when Dushasan made an attempt to outrage the modesty of Draupadi. There itself the latter took the vow not to rest till she drinks the blood of Dushasan and that marks the ultimate point of the great Mahabharata war which is painted by poet Sarala in his epic in a horrifying manner :

When Bhimasen kills Dushasan it appeared as if there is a cloudburst of blood from the Heaven that fell on the head of Draupadi. Blood burst out of Dushasan's forehead and oozed out of both his nostrills. And Panchali drank those blood in absolute contentment. (Karna parva, 102)

(Prose Rendering; Dr. Das)

In view of the above discussion we can safely draw the conclusion that poet Sarala was an avowed and a committed Shakta believer who contributed considerably to Shakta concept and philosophy.

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