Khambeswari Worship in Odisha

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The Shakti cult with its multi-dimensional manifestations has a long history, traceable to 3rd millennium B.C. A good number of clay figurines and seals have been collected from the Indus Valley excavations, which attest to the worship of the female principle of creation. These seals and figurines represent Shakti in anthropomorphic and anionic form. Apart from these finds, the Vedic literary texts have also noticed the prevalence of Shakti worship in the contemporary society. The Rig-Veda speaks of at least forty Goddesses, whose positions were subordinate to their male counterparts. Among the Rig Vedic goddess, probably Usha held an important position, who has been invoked by at least twenty hymns in the text. In the later Vedic literature Shakti is mentioned as Ambika, the sister of God Rudra. The Taittiriya Aranyaka however describes Rudra as Ambikapati and Umapati. The Kenopanisad has described Her as Uma Haimavati. In course of time both the goddesses are affiliated to Rudra as their consort, an inseparable part of the Brahman. The Sakta Upanisad accepts Her as the creative power of Brahman. J.N. Sinha, however opines that She is Brahman by Herself, and not a separate entity related to the Brahman only. This individually is the essence of Shaktism. The Saiva Upanisads consider Shakti to be the creative power of Siva, without whom, the latter can not create the universe. She creates the Prakriti, Purusa and the world. The Tripura Tapini Upanisad presents Shakti as Durga and deals exclusively with this goddess. In some Sakta Upanisads, which are tantric in character (e.g. Tripura Tapani Upanisad) we find symbolic representation of Shakti. Such symbolical terms are Bindu, Nada, Bija, Sthana, Shakti, Mantra, Yantra, Chakra and Taruka. The Devi Upanisad or Atharvasiras Upanisad has mentioned different embodiment of Shakti as Durga, Mahalakshmi, Sarasvati and Vaisnavi. Shakti here is depicted as Brahma Svarupini. During the epic age Shakti gained a prime position among the gods and goddesses of Hindu pantheon. But in spite of Her high and adorable position She did not have an independent cult of Her own. She is depicted as the consort of Siva in the Ramayana and has been considered as so much powerful that even gods were unable to undo things done by Her.

Quoting from the traditions of Kalika Purana Ramanuja Swami, the commentator of Ramayana holds that Ramachandra of Ayodhya was the first to celebrate the autumnal worship of Shakti in the form of Durga. This tradition has also been attested by the Mahabhagavata Purana, the Devi Bhagavata Purana and the Kalika Purana.
There is further evidence of the worship of female principle in the contemporary society. The Kurma Purana bears testimony to the worship of Durga by King Janaka of Mithila. Kausalya, the mother of Ramachandra, is said to have worshipped Durga for protection from all evils. The Brahma Baivarta Purana mentions the worship of Durga by Rama Purusottama and Sita. Besides, Ramayana also provides evidence of Shakti worship by the non-Aryans. The Mahabhagavata Purana informs us that, Ravana the king of Lanka was a devout worshipper of Devi and his kingdom was abounded with the temples dedicated to the goddess. The cult of Mother Goddess gained much importance in the age of the Mahabharata. This great epic devotes two stotras addressed to Goddess Durga which throws light on the position of Shakti cult and indicates that Shakti during this period represents the fusion of Vaisnava and Saiva goddess. Durga in the Mahabharata has been described as the rescuer of Her devotees from difficulties.

The Mother Goddess from time immemorial was the beloved deity of the primitive people. She was worshipped with great veneration by the non-Aryan tribes like the Savaras and the Pulindas, who dwelt in the Vindhyas as far as Mahendragiri in the south-eastern part of Odisha. The Savaras and the Pulindas were the inhabitants of Mahendragiri which is indicated in the inscriptions of Odisha of early medieval period.

We learn from Mahabharata that Sahadeva defeated the Pulindas and marched to south. In Kathasarita Sagara the Pulindas and the Savaras were associated with the Vindhyas and the eastern mountain Mahendra. Aryastava of the Khila Harivamsa describes the Mother Goddess both as an Aran and non-Aryan deity. She is addressed there as Arya, Narayani, Tribhubanesvari, Sri, Ratri and Katyayani. She is also adored in the said work in association with hills particularly the Vindhyas, rivers, caves, forests by the tribal people like the Savaras and the Pulindas. The non-Aryan aspects of the Mother Goddess are also indicated by such names as Aparna, Nama Savari etc. attributed to Her elsewhere in the same text. The primitive people of forests and hills of the Mahendragiri thus appear to have worshipped the Mother Goddess from very early times.

**Shakti worship in the form of Divine Pillar:**

The worship of Shakti like that of Siva in the form of a post or a pillar seems to have emanated from the primitive tree worship which like serpent worship was an ancient religious cult of India. The primitive people, like the Pulindas and the Savaras who belong to the Proto-Austro Asiatic group appear to have worshipped the Mother Goddess in the form of a tree or the trunk of a tree. In some early inscriptions of Odisha Siva is referred to as Sthanu i.e. a branchless trunk. In a later literary source, the Mukhalingam Kshetra Mahatmya which is a part of Skanda Purana there is an anecdote which supports the hypothesis that some of the major religious cults were associated with the primitive tree worship. According to the anecdote, a Savara chief of Mukhalingam had two wives, who lived on the product of a Madhuka tree. One of the wives of the Savara was devoted to Siva and she was blessed with golden flowers from the tree, while the other was deprived of this miraculous gift. Consequently there was a quarrel in the family and the tribal chief in annoyance cut-up the tree at its very root. Strangely to the astonishment of all, there emerged from the root of the tree, a Siva Lingam which was later on idolized as...
**Madhukesvara.** It is no wonder that the Mother Goddess like Pasupati Siva was also worshipped in the form of a log of wood or a post or a pillar, ‘Stambha’. In fact, the tradition of the Mother Goddess in the form of a Stambha or a post has come down through ages to present times. In Odisha in many obscure nooks and corners and places inhabited by tribal people the Mother Goddess is worshipped in the form of a log of wood or a pillar made of stone and She is popularly designated as Khamvesvari or Kandhunidevi, i.e. the deity of the aboriginal Kondhs. A close observation of many of the images of Mother Goddess in Odisha, a critical analysis of Aryastava and a study of the epigraphic records of Odisha of the Gupta and the post-Gupta period leads us to conclude that in the history of Shaktism in Odisha, the genesis of the cult is indicated by a fusion of the primitive tree worship, proto-historic Yoni worship and the worship of the Upanisadic concept of Uma. The Pulindas and the Savaras who dwelt in the hills and forests of Odisha in course of a process of aryavanisation under the influence of a Brahmanical school identified the worship of the Mother Goddess Uma with their sacred tree. In this process in Odisha the tree worship of the Savaras got itself mingled and merged with the worship of the Aryan Mother Goddess which ultimately gave rise to the establishment of the cult of Khambhesvari in Odisha.

The earliest reference of tree worship in Odisha is however associated with Jainism, as depicted in the caves of Khandagiri and Udayagiri. The scenes depicted on the tympanum of the Ananta Gumpha and within a railing in the Jaya Vijaya caves in the hills of Khandagiri and Udayagiri indicate the worship of sacred tree. In course of time of the evolution of the socio-religious life, the strong influence of Jainism further accelerated the primitive tree worship of the aboriginals. So, it is however quite probable that the Atavikas of Kalinga who seemed to have posed potential sense of danger to Asoka continued the worship of the Mother Goddess through the medium of a trunk of a tree or a post. There was however, a great influence of Brahmanism over them as indicated by the inscriptions of Asoka. Under Kharavela the tree worship was given due impetus by the Jain monarch. It is also quite probable that Kharavela who was a great patron of the followers of the Brahmanical school too and who is definitely known to have repaired the shrines of the Hindu gods and goddess must have contributed to the rise of the Shakti cult. The depiction of Gajalaksmi in the doorway of the Ananta gumpha further augments our hypothesis and definitely reveals that Kharavela patronized the cause of Shaktism in the 1st century B.C. According to the interpretation of D.C. Sircar three Brahmanical deities were enshrined in the 8th regnal year of Maharaja Gana. Dr. K.C. Panigrahi, however reads that in the regnal year 8 of Maharaja Sura Sarma three pieces of garments, one pedestal and two pieces of gold, the gold given being 80 panas, were settled with the honourable Mahakulapati Agisarma (Agni Sarmana) for the goddess Parnadevadi (Parnadevati). According to him Rengali, the wife of Sri Pava was the donor of the gift. Dr. Panigrahi observes- “Her name (Parnadevati) indicates that she was a sylvan goddess. Even now a goddess called Patarasuni (Goddess of leaves and jungles) is worshipped in the rural areas of Odisha”. It is known to us from Khila Harivamsa that the Mother Goddess was worshipped as Aparna and Nagna Savari. These names undoubtedly indicate the non-Aryan aspects of the cult of the Mother Goddess. The reference to goddess Parmadevati meaning the leaf...
clad goddess in the Bhadrak inscription indicates that in the third century A.D. the Mother Goddess found a definite place in the religious pantheon.

With the South Indian campaign of Samudragupta in the 4th century A.D. the stream of Brahmanical form of Hinduism began to flow from northern India to Kosala and Kalinga. Consequently there was a fusion of the primitive non-Aryan elements and the Aryan Brahmanical thoughts of Saivism and Shaktism. Thus, the primitive tree worship got itself mingled with the Brahmanical faith and made distinct contribution to the rise of Saivism and Shaktism in Odisha. In fact, the linga worship emerged out of the primitive tree worship and the trunk of a tree or a post which was the symbol of Divine Mother for the tribal people, was accepted as veritable. It’s most vital expression is noticed in the dense forest region of the Kalahandi district of Odisha which was known as Mahakantara or Mahavana in the Gupta period. The tribal population of this locality obviously used to worship a pillar or a trunk of tree as Mother Goddess, but under strong Gupta influence there was a Hinduised conversion which made them believe that the Stambha or the pillar itself was no other than the Aryan Goddess (Isvari) Uma. This fusion led to the rise of the Stambhesvari (Sanskritised form of Khambesvari) cult in 5th century A.D.

Stambhesvari, the Goddess of the Post or Pillar is one of the famous formless autochthonous deities widely worshipped in the hill tracts of Bargarh, Sambalpur, Angul, Dhenkanal, Bolangir, Subarnapur, Boudh, Kalahandi and the Ganjam districts of Odisha. She also goes by the local colloquial name of Khambesvari. She is worshipped as a manifestation of Shakti in the form of wooden posts or pillars and also through stones. She was the tutelary deity of some ruling dynasties like those of the Parvatadvakaras, the Sulkies, the Bhanjas and the feudatories of the Somavamsis like Ranaka Sri Jayanama in the early medieval period. The antiquity of the Stambhesvari cult may be traced back 5th century A.D. Since then the cult of Stambhesvari is widespread and popular particularly in Western Odisha and the Ghumsar region of South Odisha. She is still the presiding deity in most of the villages of Ghumsar. Boudh, Sonepur, Angul, Talcher and Dhenkanal regions, which consist mostly of forest tracts.

Stambhesvari was originally an aboriginal Goddess worshipped by the non-Aryan tribes of hinterland Odisha. 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. Subsequently She was transformed from a nomadic cult to Shakti cult. Gradually when the Aryan chiefs established small kingdoms of their own they had to depend upon the sturdy tribal for the consolidation and the defense of their newly established kingdoms. The Aryan kings also needed the lands of the different tribes and their services for the promotion and extension of peasant agriculture which would yield enough surplus crops to meet the requirements. So, they were dependent upon the support and loyalty of the tribes. Therefore they kept them in good humour through the gradual process of inclusion of the 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 has observed that ‘the Aryans met with the religious practices and beliefs among whom (the tribes) they ruled over and came into lasting contact with, and have assimilated some of them gradually thus modifying their own religion to a certain extent’. In this process the
dominant tribal deities like Stambhesvari were aryans. Patronage of the dominant autochthonous deities enabled the kings to consolidate their power and its legitimization in the Hindu tribal zone of hilly hinterland of western Odisha.

In this process of *aryanisation* the Brahmanas, who were granted rent free lands in the tribal areas 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. The Brahmanas 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. Prof. R.S. Sharma has rightly stated that the significance of land grants to Brahmans 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. The co-existence of Brahmanical and tribal cultures led to the interaction between these two. So much so the deities like Stambhesvari worshipped by the non-Aryan tribes entered into the Brahmanical pantheon. It may be mentioned that the hill tribes who believed in matriarchy were worshippers of Shakti. Stambhesvari is also worshipped as a manifestation of Shakti in the hill tracts of Odisha or at least in tribal surroundings. She is the best example of the aboriginal goddess of Odisha which underwent the process of aryanisation in earlier times.

Khambesvari Worship through Ages:

The earliest reference to Stambhesvari is found in the Tarasinga copper plate of Trustikara. In this inscription Trustikara has styled himself as ‘Stambhesvari Padabhakta’. The inscription reveals that Maharaja Trustikara in order to cure his ailing mother, Sri Sobhini, worshipped at the feet of Goddess Stambhesvari, the *Istadevi* of his family. It is interesting to note that some of the places names occurring in the Tarasinga plates have been located by S.N. Rajguru in the Aska region, of Ganjam district. In Aska in the Ghumusar region there is a temple of Stambhesvari, locally called as Khambesvari, on the bank of the river Rusikulya. In view of this it may be suggested the Goddess Khambesvari at Aska was enshrined at first by Trustikara in the c. 5th century A.D.

In March, 1973, the Asurgarh fort in the Kalahandi district of Odisha was excavated under the directorship of Dr. Nabin Kumar Sahu, the then Head of the Department of History of Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar. This excavation brought to light a structure which was completely buried underground. The structure was probably a temple of the mother Goddess as known from a terracotta figure of different animals. Terracotta and silver ornaments and pieces of bluish glass bangles as well as amulets and other articles for magic cure were also recovered from this site. The circular brick temple had probably wooden roof as indicated by grooves for wooden pillars. The structural ruins and antiquities unearthed from the site have been assigned to cir. 5th century A.D., the period of the first layer of regular excavation. During the time of the excavation of Asurgarh the Tarasinga Copper plate charter was discovered which reveals the rule of king named Suri Maharaja Trustikara in this region in the 5th / 6th century A.D. Maharaja Trustikara was a worshipper of Goddess Stambhesvari. The grace
of Bhagavati Stambhesvari has also been invoked in the last line (line 21) of the charter at the end. It is interesting to note that the charter has been issued from a place called Parvatadvara, which literary means gate way to the mountains. Trustikara under the influence of his mother donated the village Prastarabhataka of Debhoga Ksetra to an Aryan priest of Kasyapa gotra named Arya Drona Sarma obviously for the proper maintenance of the rituals dedicated to Stambhesvari. This epigraphic evidence gives us a clear proof of Stambhesvari worship in Asurgarh region in 5th/ 6th century A.D.

In course of the growth of Shakti worship in Odisha the Mother Goddess was worshipped both in the form of a pillar as well as in anthropomorphic form. In the post-Gupta period the Saravapuriyas of South Kosala and the Sailodbhavas of Kongoda emerged as two great royal houses which evolved from aboriginal stock. The Saravapuriyas embraced Vaisnavism and the Sailodbhavas embraced Saivism in the 7th century of the Christian era. They were deeply influenced by the Brahmanical form of Hinduism. It is no wondered therefore that the cult of Stambhesvari, which was basically a tribal one, was relegated to the background for about two centuries for want of royal patronage. The cult, however, continued to be popular among the hill tribes and rural population of Odisha.

After the fall of the Sailodbhavas, the Bhauma-Karas occupied Tosali in 736 A.D. The early Bhauma-Kara kings were Buddhists and very soon they were influenced by Saivism, Vaisnavism and Tantric form of Shaktism. But they worshipped the anthropomorphic form of the Mother Goddess. There is no evidence to reveal their association with the cult of Stambhesvari. But the Sulkis, who were the feudatories of the Bhauma-Karas popularized the cult of Stambhesvari in Kodalaka Mandala. Dhenkanal, Talcher and the neighbouring area was known as Kodalaka Mandala during the 8th and 9th centuries A.D. and was under the rule of the kings belonging to Sulki family who were the feudatories of the Bhauma-Kara rulers.

Stambhesvari was the tutelary deity of the Sulki dynasty. All the Sulki rulers have confined their names with that of their tutelary deity. Their names end with the word ‘Stambha’ such as Kanchanastambha, Ranastambha, Kulastambha and Jayastambha. In their inscriptions the Sulkis claimed to have received their kingship in their capital Kodalaka and achieved success and prosperity through the grace of Goddess Stambhesvari. In the Dhenkanal plates of Kulastambha we come across the phrase ‘Stambhesvari Labdha Vara Prasadat’. Similarly in the Puri plates of Ranastambha we find mention of ‘Stambhesvari Datta Vara Prasadat’. Ranastambha in another of his copper plate grants is said to have received boons from Stambhesvari (Stambhesvari Prapta Vara Prasadat). Stambhesvari is declared as the witness (Sakhini) of the Dhenkanal grants. In their inscriptions they described themselves as the lord of all Gonds (Gondamadhinatha). There is no doubt that the Gondomas of their inscriptions are the same as the Gonds who even now flourish in large number in Bamanda; Bonai and Gangpur regions as well as in the valley between the Sankha and the Koel. In the Dhenkanal grant of Jayastambha there is a recorded tradition that Kanadastambha first uprooted a king named Dhekata who seems to be identical with the Savara Chief Dhenka, who is often associated with Dhenkanal in popular traditions. Even now near Dhenkanal there is a stone pillar called Dhenka Savara Munda which is worshipped by the people twice a year.

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hills bordering the ex-Hindol state which formed the southern boundaries of the Kodalaka Mandala was populated by the Gonds who obviously worshipped the Goddess Stambhesvari from very early times. The Sulkies who ruled over the Gonds as feudatories of the Bhauma-Karas flourished at least from the 6th century A.D. We learn from Harasa stone inscription76 that Isanavarman in Sambat 611 i.e. 554 A.D. inflicted a crushing defeat on these Sulikas along with the Andhras and the Gaudas in course of his campaigns in eastern India. We are inclined to believe that the Sulikas were no other than the Sulkis who later on ruled over the Kodalaka Mandala under the Bhauma-Karas. They also seem to be identical with the Saulika tribe which according to Varaha Mihira77 lived in the south-eastern India near Kalinga, Vidarbha and Chedi. Thus, the tribal Sulikas or the Sulkis, who were very closely connected with the Gonds continued to worship their tribal Goddess Stambhesvari in the form of post. The following verse of the Sulki charters makes it clear that Stambhesvari was the family deity of the royal house:–

Stambhesvari Lavdha Vara Prasadah
Sulkikutlebhut Ksitipah Ksatarih/
Srman Kulastambha Iti Pratitah
Sphurat Pratapodaya-tapitarih/

It is striking to note that the Sulki rulers used the epithet Stambha as their surname such as Kanda Stambha, Kanchana Stambha, Rana Stambha, Kula Stambha, Jaya Stambha and Nidaya Stambha. By adopting this nomenclature the Sulkis obviously wanted to associate themselves with the Divine Mother whom they worshipped in the form of a Stambha or a pillar or a post. It is also interesting to note that the name of the father of the donee of the Dhenkanal grant of Jayastambha, was Khamba. Thus it is obvious that in course of the fusion of the Aryan and the non-Aryan elements even the Brahmans of the Vedic lineage showed their reverence to Khambesvari under the Sulkis. It is interesting to note that the worship of Stambhesvari is widely popular at present in the Dhenkanal, Angul and Talcher regions, once ruled by the Sulkis. Her 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 Sudha caste of a tribal affiliation. This worship is named Kaduali Puja (worship during cultivating season).

The Tungs of Yamagartta Mandala patronized Goddess Stambhesvari. The northern part of Kodalaka-Mandala constituted a separate mandala under the rule of the Tunga family and was named Yamagartta Mandala. Yamagartta Mandala finds mention for the first time in the Dhenkanal plate of Jayasimha of an unknown family and after that in all copper plate grants of the Tunga rulers. From the Dhenkanal plate of Jayasimha it is known that the capital Yamagartta was situated on the bank of a river named Mandakini. The river Mandakini has been identified with the present Mankara, which starts from the western part of Keonjhar district and passing through the Pallahara sub-division of Angul district meets the river Brahmani near Banor. The two villages named Jamra and Jamardiha are located in the valley of this river, not far off its course. According to N.K. Sahu one of these two villages may be said to have represented the medieval town of Yamagartta. It is evident that Yamagartta Mandala comprised the northern part of Dhenkanal and some portions of Keonjhar district of Odisha. The Tungas, who
ruled over Yamagartta identified with Jamagadia in Angul as feudatories of the Bhauma-Karas claimed their lordship over 18 classes of Gond people or 18 territories inhabited by the Gond people (Astadasa Gundramadhipati). We learn from the Talcher Copper plate grant of Vayada Tunga that the Tungas were the devout worshipper of the Goddess Stambhesvari. It is further interesting to note that during the reign of Vinita Tunga there flourished a district or Visaya called Khambai, which seems to be reminiscent of the Stambhesvari cult.

The Bhanjas, who ruled over Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Ganjam, Phulbani, Boudh, Sonepur and Bolangir districts of Odisha as feudatories of the Bhauma-Karas for a long period in the history of Odisha had also accepted the cult of Stambhesvari as their religious faith. The Bhanjas, who claimed that they were born of the egg of a peahen, obviously, had a tribal origin. The epigraphic records of the early Bhanjas of Mayurbhanj indicate that Ganadanda Virabhadra was born of a peahen and brought up by sage Vasistha. Virabhadra is a form Siva usually associated with the cult of the Sapta-Matrikas. We are inclined to believe that Ganadanda, a tribal chief associated with the cult of Virabhadra was the progenitor of the Bhanjas, who like many tribes trace their descent from inanimate beings like the egg of a peahen (Mayuranda Bhaitva Ganadanda Virabhadraksyh). This peculiar totemic origin of the Bhanjas leads us to believe that they had something to do with the aboriginal Bhuyans who claimed such peculiar origin. The Bhanjas of Mayurbhanj region were worshippers of Siva. Their inscriptions do not reveal their association with the cult of the Mother Goddess. But the Bhanjas of Kinjali Mandala, who issued the charters from Dhritipura and ruled over Baud-Sonepur region from the 9th century A.D. as the subordinate chiefs (Ranakas) of the Bhauma-Karas revived the cult of Stambhesvari although they accepted Saivism and Vaisnavism in different periods. Regarding the identification of Kinjali Mandala there is division of opinion among the scholars. B.C. Majumdar identified Kinjali with Khemidi. This Khemidi has been mentioned in the Ratnapur Stone inscription of Jajalladeva of 1114 A.D. Apparently Khemidi is not the variant of Kinjali. Hiralal identifies Kinjali with Keonjhar but this does not seem tenable as none of the places and rivers mentioned in the copper plate charters of the Bhanja rulers of Kinjali can be located in Keonjhar region. In this consideration B. Mishra’s identification of Kinjali with Injili in Angul may also be ruled out. The capital of Kinjail Mandala was at Dhritipura, a place which is now difficult to be properly identified. But the rich antiquities of Boudh town warrant a strong supposition that this place was the headquarters of the Bhanja kings of Kinjali Mandala before it assumed Buddhist significance. Kinjali was an extensive area and in the epigraphic records it has often been referred to as Uvaya Kinjali which indicates that this mandala was divided into two parts. To all probability the river Mahanadi divided Kinjali Mandala into two administrative divisions such as Uttra Khinjali and Daksina Kinjali. The Visayas named Uttarapalli and Daksinapalli mentioned in the Taspaiker and Singhara charters respectively of Ranabhanja were probably so named because of their location in northern and southern division of Kinjali Mandala. Uttarapalli is identified with modern Utrapali, situated to the north of Mahanadi and Daksinapalli situated to the south of the same river on the bank of its tributary Salanki.

During the age of the Bhanjas in the Kinjali mandala pillars and posts were
worshipped not only as Isvari (Goddess), but also as Deva (God). Obviously therefore we find the nomenclature of Stambhadeva in the epigraphs of the Bhanjas. For example, one responsible officer (Dutaka under Silabhanja-II alias Tribhubana Kalasa was called Bhattaraka Stamba Deva. A learned Brahmin of the Vajasanevi Charana with distinct Vedic lineage was also the donee of Komanda copper plate grant of Nattabhanja alias Kalyana Kalasa was Stambha Deva. These instances very clearly indicate that the Aryans in Khinjali Mandala had accepted the medium of a post or a pillar as the iconic representation of God. It is also interesting to note that in two sets of copper plate grants of Vidyadhara Bhanja alias Amogha Kalasa (Sambat 174 i.e. 910 A.D.) a minister of war and peace was known as Stambha. Among the Bhanjas of Khinjali Mandala who ruled from Dhritipura as their political headquarters, Ranabhanja was the first and the only monarch who is known to have revived the cult of Stambhesvari. The cult of Stambhesvari was popular in Ganjam and Kalahandi districts of Odisha in Gupta period. In the post Gupta period it did not receive any royal patronage under the Sailodbhavas and the Saravapuriyas. But it seems that among the innumerable aboriginal tribes of Sonepur, Boudh, Phulbani, Athmallik and Ghumusar regions the cult was very popular. When Ranabhanja, son of Satrubhanja occupied the Athmallik region, he was obviously influenced by the cult of Stambhesvari, which was popular among the natives of that locality. In line 15 of the Odisha Museum plate of his 9th regnal year Ranabhanja calls himself “Stambhesvari Lavdha Vara Prasadah” although he was a devout worshipper of Siva (Parama Mahesvara). This acceptance of Shaktism might be under the influence of Bhatta Varada, who migrated from Varendri in Bengal and settled in the village Vaisyama in the Boudh – Athmallik region of Odisha. Shaktism was popular in Radha and Varendri in early medieval period and therefore we are inclined to believe that Bhatta Bharada, who must have deeply influenced Ranabhanja, was a worshipper of Mother Goddess. In fact all through his life except in the fag-end of his career Ranabhanja continued to be a devout worshipper of Stambhesvari and extended benevolent patronage for the growth and development of the cult in Boudh- Sonepur region. Out of his ten copper plate grants, which have been so far available, in the first eight charters he continued to refer to the grace and boon of the Divine Mother Stambhesvari. It was only by his 54th regnal year that he discontinued the reference to the grace of goddess Stambhesvari and since then he professed to have unsullied devotion to Lord Siva only. In his two sets of Boudh charters dated in his 54th and 58th regnal year he described himself only as Parama Mahesvara. The successors of Ranabhanja were deeply influenced by Vaisnavism. Yet they continued to remain devoted to the Goddess Stambhesvari. When Janmejaya occupied Khinjali Mandala the Bhanjas continued to be the Mahasamantas of the Somavamsis. In the N.K.Sahu Museum Plates of the time of Mahabhavagupta Janmejaya one Bhanja Chief (Andojabhava) Mahasa-mantadhipati Ranaka Sri Devapya, son of Ranaka Sri Sakilla, describes himself as Parama Vaisnava as well as a devotee of the Goddess Khambesvari (Khambesvari Vara Lavdha Prasadah).

The Somavamsis, who ultimately ousted the Bhanjas from Boudh-Sonepur region, were devout worshippers of Siva. They were deeply influenced by the Saivite teachers like Sadasivacharya, Pramathacharya and Gaganasivacharya, of the Mattamayura school and under them Saivism in Odisha reached its
highest watermark. However they continued to remain devoted to the Mother Goddess Stambhesvari, who was the presiding deity of the Boudh- Sonepur region. The goddess who was worshipped through the medium of a post was also at one time designated as Ambika. We learn it from the Olasing Copper Plate of Bhanu Vandhana of 7th century A.D. In the said inscription there is reference to Ambika Maninagesvara Bhattacharya. Ambika, associated with Maninagesvara Bhattacharya seems to be identical with goddess Maninagesvari enshrined and worshipped at Ranpur. In course of time Stambhesvari was identified with Ambika, who is referred to as Bhagavati Sri Panchamvari Bhadrambika in line 10 of the Maranjamura charter of Mahasivagupta Yayati–II. In this context Ambika or Bhadrambika is described as the presiding deity of Pattana Suvarnapura identical with modern Sonepur. Thus there is no doubt that in the history of Shakti worship in Odisha the tribal goddess Stambhesvari was accepted as Ambika and Bhadra. The Saivite teachers of the Mattamayura School had also accepted the Tantric form of Shaktism and it is no wonder therefore, that under their influence both Saivism and Shaktism began to thrive simultaneously. The depictions of Saptamatakas in the temple of Mukteswar at Bhubaneswar and in the temple of Markandhesvar at Purī are clear evidences of the acceptance of Shaktism by the Somavamsis. They had also worshipped Narasimha, who came out of a pillar or a Stambha according to the Puranic depiction. By the time of Yayati-II the Somavamsis had accepted both Saivism and Shaktism and the name Chandihara is another name of Yayati-II, is also another evidence in support of the above fact. When the Somavamsis occupied Boudh- Sonepur region they came in greater touch with Vaisnavism which had been popularized by the Bhanjas in Khinjali Mandala. Thus the Somavamsis were under the tripartite influence of Vaisnavism, Saivism and Shaktism. When they occupied Utkala they are known to have built a shrine for Purusottama Jagannath at Puri and integrated it with that of Bhadrambika and Ekanamsa, which contributed to the concept and iconography of Subhadra in the triad of Jagannath.

During the reign of the Somavasmis, Stambhesvari was also the presiding deity of some of their feudatory chiefs. The Kamalpur copper plate grant of Ranaka Sri Jayarnama, a feudatory of the last Somavamsi king Karna Deva (C.A.D. 1110-1110) records that the donor Jayanama received boons from Khambesvari (Sri Khambesvari Vara Labdha Preasada). This is the first inscription in which the Odia word Khambesvari is used from the Sanskrit Stambhesvari. It is significant to note that the Somavamsis, who were staunch Saivites showed toleration towards the Khambesvari cult worshipped by their feudatories.

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

Stambhesvari was also the presiding deity of the Chouhan rulers of Sonepur Gadjat state. It is said Rajraj Singh Deo, the great grandson of
Lal Sai Deo, married in the Khemidi royal family and his wife is reported to have carried with her the tutelary goddess Kambesvari of her Khimidi ancestors. Rajaraj Sing Deo then built a temple for Kambesvari to honour the goddess of his wife’s forebears.

It is suggested that the representation of Stambhesvari was probably made out of a Stambha (pillar) indicating a Siva Linga. Such a linga with its representation of Shakti is no doubt found among the sculptural remains of eastern India. It should, however, be pointed out that, what-ever 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 Prakrit name Kambesvari on the form of a post or pillar of wood or stone without any reference to Siva Linga. The stone 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. The priests of Kambesvari 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 Maliani. The puja is performed in some shrines everyday and in some other once in a week or in a month. It is believed that Stambhesvari protects human beings, cures diseases, ascertains fertility and confers every form of mundane benefit.

Istadevi of the Dumals:

The Dumals are another important primitive tribe of Odisha. They belong to the agricultural community. Most of the Dumals however identify themselves as Nanda Goutras. About the origin of the Dumals, some say that they have come out from Dimba (egg). Others are of the opinion that they are the cowherds of the Raja of Puri. Everyday they used to supply milk, curd and ghee to the Jagannath temple. Once, a vulture sat on the temple. The puja panda (priest) had a dream and came to know that the ghee served to Jagannath was impure. For this Lord Jagannath was dissatisfied and the vulture appeared on the temple. The news was communicated to the Raja. The Raja was annoyed with this and decided to punish the cowherds. One official secretly informed the cowherds about the Raja’s decision.

Those who had supplied ghee to the temple left the place at night with family and moved towards west. After many days they settled at Dumalagarh in Athamallik region of Boudh. In course of time those cowherds of Dumalgarh came to be known as Dumal Gouras. Boudh was their main centre of habitation. From there they have spread to other places. Due to heavy concentration of this caste in Boudh the Raja of Boudh was known as ‘Dedhalaksha dumbadhipati’ or the King of one and half lakhs of Dumals. The Raja employed many of the Dumals in respectable posts. He gave some Dumals as dowry to the Raja of Patna. The Dumals adopted Mahakur as their surname. Afterwards Mahakur became Mahakuda, Mahakhuda and Mahakul. Some says that the Dumals had come from Odisinga region of Athamallik. It has significance from the geographical point of view, as in the copper plates of the Trikalinga Guptas its name is found. Some other say that the Dumals had come from Khemidi area. It is said :-

“Khemidi rajya nija sthana
Dedhalaksha dumba kala bhiana.”
From this it is known that Khemidi was the original inhabitant of the Dumals and more than one lakhs Dumals were settled there.

The Dumals worship Stambhesvari or Khambesvari as their presiding deity on the full moon day on the month of Asvina (September-October). They place their tutelary deity in the north-east corner of a dark room and worship. They never use black dresses or ornaments. During the time of festivals they use red dresses. They worship two pillars, one represents Khambesvari and other represents Paramesvari. The pillar which represents Paramesvari is made of Rohini wood. Lastly it can be concluded that Khambhesvari is the presiding deity of the Dumals.

**Holy Shrines of the Goddess:**

Aska in the Ganjam district is one of the early centres of the cult of Khambesvari. Here, the goddess is worshipped in the form of a wooden post and a particular street of the township known as Khambesvari Patana. Not far from Aska, there are villages named Pathara, Debhumi and Tandra which seem to be reminiscent of Parvatadvaraka, Debhagaka and Tarabhraramara respectively of the Terasinga grant of Trustikara.

The Khambesvari temple at Aska is famous among the shrines of the autochthonous deities of Odisha. An interesting legend of this temple says that once Goddess Khambesvari appeared in a dream before Khabamuni, who lived in the forest and desired that She should be worshipped by the latter. As per the stipulation of Khabamuni She lived in the hut as his 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 belle. Khabamuni was very sad to know about this and one fine morning to save himself revealed the true self of the girl, who (the Goddess) convinced the people of the truth disclosed by Khabamuni 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 let 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 declined that Her childhood play or disguise was over, that Her foster father (Khabamuni) 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 tribal to Goddess Khambesvari. The feature of the baby cut into pieces conveys the idea of human sacrifices or at least *tantric* practices associated with the Goddess.

The Goddess Khambesvari 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 on the sanctum. The main image consists of a stone pole which has been anthropomorphized by the addition of a disc 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 golden ornaments. “Her image confers both: the impression of a real Hindu image, whose body and limbs are mostly not to be seen because of the dresses and ornaments and the impression of the people, whose form is still evident in spite of the dress. The priests of the temple are Sudras.
who have a tribal origin. In the past the priests were known as Sudra Munis. But the present generations of the 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.

Khiching in the Mayurbhanj district is another important religious centre of Goddess Kambhesvari. K.C. Panigrahi has witnessed the establishment of Kambhesvari shrines in the neighbouring village of his residence at Khiching. The wooden pillar representing the deity and worshipped by the villagers as the 'gramadevati' is renewed in every ten years and the ceremony of renewal is known as 'dasandhi'.

The valley of Tel in the district of Kalahandi is also another prominent centre of the cult of Kambhesvari in the early history of Shaktism in Odisha. In fact the Terasinga charter which was discovered in the Tel Valley is the first epigraphic record which refers to the earliest prevalence of Stambhesvari cult in Odisha. Tarabhraramaraka which was the capital of Maharaja Trustikara seems to be identical with Telbhamara near the ancient site of Belkhandi in the district of Kalahandi. Amathagarh which is very close to Belkhandi we find some archaeological remains of 5th and 6th centuries A.D. In course of the archaeological survey of Asurgarh a circular structure of 6th century A.D. was discovered. This structure was probably associated with the cult of Stambhesvari.

Gopal Prasad near Talcher in the district of Angul is another interesting site associated with the cult of Kambhesvari. Here the Goddess Hingula is represented by a pebble and two pillars of Sal wood are said to represent Budhi Thakhurani and Kambhesvari. It is important to note here that this region was included in Kodalaka Mandala and was ruled by the Sulkis who patronized Stambhesvari.

Gandharadi is also one of the important centres of Kambhesvari cult. This tract was within Khinjali Mandala. In the 9th and 10th century A.D. the Bhanja dynasty of Khinjali Mandala patronized Goddess Stambhesvari. In their copper plate grants like Taspaikera plate and Singhara copper plate of Ranaka Ranabhanja the king has been said to have received boons from Goddess Stambhesvari (Stambhesvari-Vara Labdha Prasadah).

The historic site of Suvarnapura i.e. modern Sonepur, which was the capital of the Bhanjas and the Somavamsis in the early mediaeval period was a very important strong hold of the cult of Stambhesvari. The temple of Kambhesvari at Sonepur represents the most vibrant manifestation of the cult from the age of the Bhanjas, who ruled Baud-Sonepur region with Dhritipura as their capital. The Somavamsis seemed to have inherited the cult of Stambhesvari from the Ranabhanja, who was a patron of the cult in the 9th century A.D. Kambhesvari was also the presiding deity of the Chouhan rulers of Sonepur state. It is most important to note here that in the Kambhesvari temple of Sonepur, one pillar representing Kambhesvari only is worshipped in the garbhagriha while as two pillar representing Kambhesvari and Paramesvari are worshipped in some other Kambhesvari temples. The priests of the Khatembesvari temple of Sonepur are 'mali' by caste.

Birmaharajpur, a sub-division of Sonepur district and its neighbourhood in one of the important religious centres of Kambhesvari cult. It is important to note that during the reign of the Bhanjas of Khinjali Mandala this area was ruled by them and was known as Uttarapalli Visaya.
This area was known as Koleda Mandala during reign of the Somavamis and was centre of Stambhesvari cult as known from the Kamalpur copper plate grant. The Kamalpur copper plate grant of Ranaka Sri Jayarnama, a feudatory of the last Somavamsi king Karna Deva records that the donor Jayarnama received boons from Khambesvari (Sri Khambesvari Vara Labdha Prasadah). This is the first inscription in which the Odia word Khambesvari is used in place of Sanskrit word Stambhesvari.

Athamallik, a sub-division of Angul district is a prominent centre of Khambesvari cult. It is important to note that this region was ruled by the Sulkis who were the devout worshipper of Goddess Stambhesvari. When Ranabhanja, the son of Satrubhanja occupied the Athamallik region he was obviously influenced by the cult of Stambhesvari which was popular among the natives of that locality. Odsinga, a village is situated near the Athamallik town which is said to be the early inhabitant of the Dunal community, who seem to be tribal origin and worship Khambesvari as their Istadevi.

**Conclusion:**

There is not the division of opinion that the Khambhesvari is one of the best examples of the autochthonous Goddess of Odisha which underwent the process of aryansation in earlier times. Having no specific iconographic features, nor appearing in brahmanical all Indian theology Stambhesvari “was acknowledged as a member of the documented theology of the society in whose contact the tribes lived. As a link between Hindunisation and local tradition Goddess Khambesvari has played a significant role in the folk religion of Odisha. This deity was originally worshipped by the Khonds, Savaras, Kuis and other tribal people of southern Odisha in earlier times. Worshipped in the form of stones She has been anthropomorphized and converted into images.

The cult of Stambhesvari continued to be a popular faith of the people of Odisha for centuries. Some royal families of even present times worship a log of wood as their tutelary deity. For example, the royal family of Ranjusna near Paralakhemundi worships a log of wood called Khilakunda Bhagavati or Vamsadanda Devi. It may be noted that in Odisha *khila* means post and *vamsa* means a bamboo stick.

Thus the cult of Stambhesvari which was popular among the aboriginal tribes is well illustrated in the worship of the Mother Goddess called Kandhunidevi at Suruda in the Ganjam district. The very nomenclature of the deity indicates that the goddess is worshipped by the Kondhs who live in the forest regions of the Ganjam and the Phulbani districts of Odisha. The Kondhs like the Savaras and the Pulindas use to wear leaves like pieces of clothes. The Savaras who wear leaves are called Patrasavara or Patarsouras. The icon of Kandhunidevi of Suruda is practically an wooden pillar, although the devotees have richly decorated the post with clothes and ornaments in order to present a human form of the deity. Kandhunidevi is in all probability a prototype of Parnadevati, the goddess of the aboriginals, who was worshipped as Stambhesvari in the 5th century of the Christian era.

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