



Sakti, the cradle of the phenomenal existence of beings, plays a vital role not only in India but also in the whole world. She is the source of cosmic evolution and the controller of all forces and potentialities of nature. She is the immediate cause of the perceptible world and all the beings are in Her domain. As such, to know Her in the entirety is to know Her reality. To add more, Saktism is the worship of Sakti or the female principle, the primary factor in the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe. The term Sakti represents divinity in general and stands for the energising power of some divinity in



## Sakti Cult in Odisha

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particular. Being feminine in gender She has long been associated with the various male deities as their energy but in Saktism the energy of each God becomes personified as his consort, and thus, if a god is separated from his consort or Sakti, he is powerless and inert. To justify this statement, Sankaracharya, the propounder of monistic theory, in the *Saundaryalahari* has eulogised the greatness of Sakti in the following manner:

*Sivah saktya yukto yadi bhavati saktah prabhavitum  
na ced evam devo na khalu kusalah spanditumapi;  
ata stvam aradhyam Hari-Hara-Virincadibhir api  
pranantum stotum va katham akrtā-punyah prabhavati*

*(Saundaryalahari, sloka 1)*

Sakti cult played an important role in the socio-religious life of the Odishan people. The archeological as well as literary sources prove the prevalence of Sakti cult in Odisha to an early age. Both in paintings and engravings of Odishan rock art several instances of bisected triangles resembling female genital have been encountered<sup>1</sup>. Repeated occurrences of such symbols in the different rock shelters amply suggest the popularity of the primordial mother cult or the cult of fecundity during the pre-historic period. Discovery of perforated stones in rock shelters, the other objects related to Saktism from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites and the Yoni stone found from the district of Kalahandi and Nuapada



region have often proved the beginning of Sakti cult in Odisha to a hoary past. Besides, one of the earliest references appears in the line six of Rock Edict XIII of Asok which alludes to the mother-worship by the Atavikas who lived in the forest regions of Kalinga<sup>2</sup>. The writings of Sarala Das, celebrated author of Odia literature also illustrates this point. This great poet has written a special version of the Mahabharata in the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. which supports the prevalence and popularity of Saktism in Odisha. Every day, as pointed out by B.C Pradhan, the Divine Mother, usually in the form of a post or a pillar, is worshipped in virtually every forest (*atavi*) region in Odisha while the concept of Vana Durga became especially popular in the medieval period<sup>3</sup>. Non-Aryan tribes like Savaras and the Pulindas who were the inhabitants of the forest area of Mahendragiri Mountain, as indicated in the early Odishan inscriptions<sup>4</sup> as well as in the Sanskrit works such as Kathasaritsagara<sup>5</sup>, were great devotees of the Divine Mother. Like the phallus-worship resembling Lord Siva, the worship of Sakti in the form of a log of wood, a post, or a stone pillar (*stambha*) most likely evolved from primitive tree worship. In Odisha this form of the Divine Mother is often designated as Stambhesvari (Khambhesvari), or as Kandhunidevi i.e. the deity of the aboriginal Khonds<sup>6</sup>.

The earliest epigraphic reference to the tribal goddess in Odisha appears in the Bhadrak inscription of Maharaja Surasarma, dated on Palaeological ground to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., where the goddess Parnnadevati (goddess of leaves or forest) received donations of garments, gold and a pedestal from a lady named Ranghali<sup>7</sup>. The tradition of worshipping the goddess of leave

under the name Patarasuni is still prevalent in the rural areas of Odisha<sup>8</sup>. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. due to the influence of south Indian campaign of Samudragupta<sup>9</sup>, Brahmanical form of Hinduism percolated into the tribal hinter lands of ancient Kosala and Kalinga leading to the transformation of the tribal Stambha/Khamba or the pillar to Stambhesvari or Khambhesvari. Moreover, the copper plate of Terasinga refers to Bhagavati Stambhesvari as the tutelary deity of Maharaja Tustikara, whose mother Sri Sobhini Kaustubhesvari was an ardent devotee of Stambhesvari. The charter was issued at a place named Parvatadvarya (gateway to mountains)<sup>10</sup>. The Stambhesvari cult still survives at the village level in western Odisha and temples are also erected in the honour of Stambhesvari at Sonapur and at Aska.

In addition to the ethnographic and epigraphic records, the sacred religious texts such as *Mahabharata*, *Vayu Purana*, *Brahma Purana*, *Kapila Samhita*, *Candi Purana*, *Kubjika Tantra*, *Viraja-Ksetra Mahatmya*, *Bata Abakasa* etc. also refer to the prevalence of Sakti cult in Odisha. Starting from the Sailodbhavas down to the rule of the Gajapati kings Saktism in one form or the other has crept into the socio-religious beliefs of the Odishan people.

### Saktism in Gupta Period

Sakti cult in the form of female divinity especially the deity of Viraja at Jajpur made its appearance in Odisha during the Gupta period. The image is assigned to pre-Gupta period by R.P.Chanda<sup>11</sup> and Gupta period by K.C. Panigrahi<sup>12</sup>. The two armed deity Viraja represents the earliest form of Sakti in Odisha. During the



post-Gupta period the cult of Stambesvari, the other important goddess cult of Odisha was sanskritised and became the family deity of the Sulki dynasty of Kodalaka Mandala (A.D.600-900)<sup>13</sup>, as evidenced from the epigraphic records. In the same period the rulers of Kangoda kingdom, Sailodbhavas were the devout worshippers of Siva along with Parvati. For the first time in the history of Odishan inscriptions we find an invocatory verse pertaining to the divine couple of Sambhu (Siva) and Parvati (Sakti) in the preamble of the undated Buguda charter<sup>14</sup> of Madhavaraja II of the Sailodbhava dynasty. Another important epigraphical record of Sailodbhavas which sheds light on the Sakta *pitha* of Odisha is the Banapur copper plate grant of Dharmaraja Srimanabhita making endowments for the presiding deity Bhagavati. Further, Sakta images were also carved on the outer walls of some Saivite temples of Bhubaneswar due to the patronage of Sailodbhavas which clearly indicate the syncretic cult of *Sakta-pasupata*<sup>15</sup> during 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Apart from these, the Sakta shrines of Tara-Tarini of Purusottamapur and Sikharacandi of Patia also reveal the worship of mother goddess during the regime of Sailodbhava dynasty.

### Saktism in Bhauma-Kara Period

The entire history of the Bhauma-kara dynasty is quite emblematic of the modalities of expansion of Saktism in Odisha in a period marked for the integration of goddess-cult with Saivism and Mahayana Buddhism on the common religious background formed by *Tantric* ideals and practices then in ascent in the Odia society<sup>16</sup>. Although there was not a single Bhauma ruler who embraced Saktism as an independent faith yet the Dhenkanal copper plate grant<sup>17</sup> of Tribhuvana

Mahadevi provides references to two female deities Katyayani and Siddha Gauri. The inscription<sup>18</sup> on an image of Camunda at Jajapur also reveals that Vatsadevi, a queen of the Bhauma period patronized this cult of Saptamatrkas particularly that of Camunda. Besides, some monumental and sculptural representations of the Bhauma period also throw focus on the prevalence of Sakti cult in Odisha. The Sakta shrines of Vaital, Mohini and Uttaresvara of Bhubaneswar, the Khiching temple of Mayurbhanja and Sakta images of Prachi Valley still remind us about the spread of Saktism in Odisha during the Bhauma-kara rule. Moreover, the tribal pillar goddess Stambhesvari was patronised by the Bhaumakaras and Bhanjas of Khinjalimandala as evidenced from the copper plate grants<sup>19</sup> of these two dynasties. Thus, we can conclude that the religious policy during the Bhauma-kara rule aimed at conciliating *Tantric* Buddhism, the dynasty's original faith, with Saktism and Saivism, the dominant faiths among the Odias at the time when the Bhaumas became the sovereigns of the country<sup>20</sup>.

### Saktism in Somavamsi Period

The Somavamsi Kings, though Saivas by faith, patronised Sakti in a large scale during the early years of their rule. It is striking to note that the Somavamsis have saluted Bhagavati Pancambari as the presiding deity of Suvarnapura, their first capital in Kosala as it is evidenced from the Maranjamura charter<sup>21</sup>. In the Brahmesvara temple inscription at Bhubaneswar, Somavamsi ruler Yayati II is recorded as Candihara since he was an ardent devotee of both Candi (Sakti) and Hara (Siva)<sup>22</sup>.

The dominant trend in the Somavamsi period was directed in softening or eliminating the



most awful and gruesome aspects of Sakti-worship which had its popularity in Odisha during the Bhauma-kara period. The best instance of this new trend was that all the Sakta shrines erected by Somavamsis at Bhubaneswar were presided over by the goddesses in pacific form. The Khakhara temple dedicated to the goddess Gauri in the Kedara-Gauri temple compound (10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)<sup>23</sup> as well as two other such shrines respectively dedicated to the goddess Gopalini and Savitri in the Lingaraja complex (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)<sup>24</sup> testify, by virtue of the non-fearful aspect of their own presiding deities, to the more moderate course imparted to the Sakti cult at Bhubaneswar by the Somavamsi rulers.

It is noteworthy to mention that the benevolent, motherly and nurturing aspect of the Matrkas associating each of these deities with a baby placed on their lap developed during the period of Somavamsis. The earlier Matrka images of Odisha do not hold babies in their arms while, on the other hand, the baby-in-lap motif is present in the set of Matrkas found at Ranipur-Jharial<sup>25</sup> and Belakhandi in the Bolangir-Kalahandi regions, two sites of Somavamsi art assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. The Matrkas of Muktesvara temple at Bhubaneswar, Dasasvamedhaghat at Jajapur, Markandesvara at Puri and the collapsed Matrka temple at Sathalapur in Cuttack district are assignable to the initial part of the Somavamsi rule over coastal Odisha<sup>26</sup>.

The incorporation of the folk goddess Mangala into the Brahmanical Sakta pantheon of Odisha was also another achievement of the Somavamsi dynasty. It appears that the Somavamsi rulers were responsible for the Sanskritisation of the popular semi-tribal cult of Mangala, which in subsequent epochs would have

formed a sort of religious bridge uniting Odishan Saktism to Vaisnavism<sup>27</sup>.

To conclude the sketch of the development of Sakti cult in Odisha during the Somavamsi period, mention is here to be made of the triumph, occurred in that epoch, of the female body in the field of sculptural art and highlighting the female beauty, grace, warmth and sensuousness inherent in the moderate *kaula* doctrines fostered by the Somavamsi monarchs.

### Saktism in Ganga Period

The Ganga monarchs of Odisha seemingly endeavoured to eliminate Saktism as an independent form of religion and to make it subservient to the major male-oriented Hindu cults which were in their turn made subservient to the national cult of Jagannath. In support of this view a tradition recorded in the Madala Panji, the chronicle of the temple of Jagannath at Puri, states that Codaganga banished all goddesses from Odisha. Another tradition mentioned in a copy of the same chronicle recovered from Berhampur indicates that Codaganga was antagonistic to all the Sakta images except a few like Viraja at Jajpur, this goddess being considered to be a part of *pancadevata-upasana* fostered by the Gangas themselves<sup>28</sup>. The prevalent trend of Devi worship during the Imperial Ganga period was to provide all the male divinities with the female consorts, whose cult icons were enshrined in the minor temples built in the compound of each great Odishan temple dedicated to Hindu God<sup>29</sup>. Most probably, the Gangas intended in this way to show the people their religious catholicity making a room for the Sakti cult in the premises of the male divinities and at the same time, to deny the role of the Devi as an independent cult heroine.



The Gangas earned the fame for building a shrine for the goddess Parvati, second in magnitude only to the main temple itself, in the Lingaraja temple complex at Bhubaneswar. The temple was dedicated to Parvati in Her form as Annapurna (the giver of food and plenty or the goddess of nourishment, the vegetable-bestowing and food giving aspect of the Devi representing the later power of given plentiful crops). At the holy place of Puri, whose presiding deity was Jagannath, the emperor Codaganga erected a subsidiary shrine for the worship of Laksmi, the goddess of wealth considering Her as the consort of that great god<sup>30</sup>. This shrine, which in point of importance is only next to the main temple, later on exceeded in popularity as the Pithesvari Vimala, the Sakta *Tantric* goddess.

The Sakta *Tantric* influence is also noticed in the daily rituals of Jagannath temple. For instance, the cult image of Jagannath is placed on a *Sricakra-yantra* and is worshipped in the *bija-mantra klim* (termed as *kama-bija*, the seed of desire) which represents the procreative power of the universal Sakti. Moreover, the Saudarsini *Vamadeva Samhita*, a *Tantric* text, states that Jagannath is the very self of Daksina Kalika<sup>31</sup>. The Sakta devotees of Odisha recognise Puri as one of the traditional Sakta *pithas* where Vimala is regarded as Bhairavi and Jagannath, merely as Her Bhairava<sup>32</sup>. (*Vimala Yatra Bhairavi Jagannathastu Bhairavah*). Even the deity Subhadra has been identified with Katyayani in the *Purusottama Mahatmya* of the *Skanda Purana*<sup>33</sup>.

At the *arka ksetra* of Konark, where the huge and magnificent Surya temple erected by the Ganga emperor Narasimha Deva (A.D. 1238-64) stands in half-ruined conditions not far from

the seashore, the female counterpart of the presiding God, (the sun) was Chaya, whose collapsed shrine still exists to the south-west of the main temple.

The Vaisnava Trinity enshrined in the sanctum of the temple of Ananta-Vasudeva at Bhubaneswar (AD1278), was formed by the cult icons of Krsna, Balarama and Ekanamsa. Here Ekanamsa/Subhadra conceived as the younger sister of Krsna and Balarama as per the Mahabharata and Harivamsa conform Her iconography as Parvati which is smaller in size than those of the two male deities flanking Her on both sides. Besides, an inscription of the Ananta-Vasudeva temple states that Chodaganga was not only a hero but an emperor also and performed the worship of the goddess after his victory over the hostile kings<sup>34</sup>.

The brick temple of Motia in the Prachi Valley, the Gangesvari temple of Bayalisbati near Konark are the Sakta shrines which bear the testimony to the prevalence of Sakti cult during the period of the Gangas. The addition of Saktis for the *dikpalas* and tutelary deities for the military establishments (goddesses of forts) strengthen further the concept of Saktism under the Ganga rule.

### Saktism in Suryavamsi Period

The Suryavamsis or the Gajapatis, who succeeded the Gangas did not introduce any new feature into the ritualistic pattern of Saktism. Rather they adhered themselves to the Ganga tradition of religious tolerance and eclecticism. Although no Sakta temple of significance was erected in Odisha yet the emergence of the two Sakta centers such as Syamakali near the old royal palace at Puri and Ugratara at Bhusandapur in



Khurda district are noteworthy from the view point of the continuation and spread of Saktism during the rule of the Suryavamsi Gajapatis.

The cult of Laksmi which is essentially a household rural form of Sakti-worship, having little connection with the community worship in temples, however, gained a tremendous popularity in Odisha starting from the Suryavamsi period. The Odia women were regarded responsible for the wealth and prosperity of their family members, for whose benefit they had to perform the daily religious rites properly with a special accent on the propitiation of the goddess Laksmi. The ideal of womanliness typical of a patriarchal society was thus expressed at best in the cult of Laksmi<sup>35</sup>.

The revival of Sakta literature during this period also indicates the eminence of Sakti worship in Odisha. The important Sakta literatures composed in this period were the *Mahalaksmi Purana* of Balarama Dasa, the *Candi Purana* of Sarala Dasa, Saiva-Sakta doctrines of Jagannath Dasa, Gitagovinda of Jayadeva etc. Gajapati Purusottama Deva was a devotee of Durga as evidenced from a copper plate inscription issued by him to Potesvara Bhatta in 1471 A.D. He was also credited with the composition of two Sakta works written in praise of Durga and Bhubaneswari respectively<sup>36</sup>.

The feudal rulers of the hinterlands of Odisha preferably used to worship as their tutelary deity a form of the great goddess, this being a very natural choice in a land where Sakti cult was the predominant form of religion. The tutelary deity gradually assumed the form of *Istadevata* of the ruling family of Odisha during the medieval period. However, in the later medieval period some local goddesses of Odisha also rose to prominence as the tutelary deities of

some feudatory families. The following examples may be taken into account to justify the above statement.

- 1) Kichakesvari was the tutelary deity of the Bhanjas of the Khijingakotta<sup>37</sup> in the present Mayurbhanja district.
- 2) Tarini of Ghatagaon<sup>38</sup> was the tutelary deity of the Bhanjas of Keonjhar.
- 3) Hingula of Gopalprasad was the tutelary deity of the Nala and Sulki rulers of Talcher area of Dhenkanal district.
- 4) Maninaga Devi<sup>39</sup> was the tutelary deity of royal family of Ranpur in Nayagarh district.
- 5) Vyaghra Devi was the tutelary deity of the Bhanjas of Ghumsara at Kuladha in Ganjam district.
- 6) Bhairavi was the tutelary deity of the Rajas of Boudh.
- 7) Patnesvari was the tutelary deity of the Chauhan rulers of Patnagarh in Bolangir district.
- 8) Samalesvari was the tutelary deity of the Chauhan<sup>40</sup> rulers in Sambalpur district.
- 9) Samalesvari enshrined at Suvarnapur was the tutelary deity of the Chauhan rulers of Suvarnapur.
- 10) Manikesvari at Bhawanipatana<sup>41</sup> was the tutelary deity of the *Naga* royal family of Kalahandi district.
- 11) Barunei and Arunei were the tutelary deities of the Bhoi dynasty of Khurda district etc.

With the increasing popularity of Vaisnava cult, with that of Jagannath eventually being elevated to the state religion, royal patronage of



Saktism became absorbed by Vaisnavism. Images of Devi were often housed in the sanctum with Madhava while in the cult of Purusottam the deity was always worshipped together with the Sakti, the latter being transformed into Subhadra in the cult of Jagannath, which absorbed all of the religious cults into itself. Thus, prehistorical development of Sakti cult in Odisha was not one and the same in all the parts of the territory.

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