With the evolution of society religion took a complicated shape with the emergence of Gods and goddesses, each of them symbolizing a particular phenomenon. This process was not the specialty of India, but evolved simultaneously in different parts of the ancient world. The earliest known Greek Goddess represents a piece of long stone like Sivalinga. The ancient Egyptian propitiated before erection of pyramid, the Goddess Hathar in shape of a cow and Sevak in form of an alligator. The Gaia Devi of Greece was later on transformed into Dharitri Ma or Mother Goddess. The mother Goddess of the Roman was Terramater. The ancient Semitics propitiated the Goddess Nana. On the coins of Kushana emperors Huviska Goddess Nana with an inscription of her name is depicted. In the ancient India Bhramari was a Goddess of this type. A Goddess in ancient Egypt is a war Goddess like Indian Durga. In ancient Babylon and Assyria the benevolent Istar deity was the earliest Goddess conceived from the natural phenomenon. In Babylon every woman before copulation with her husband would be bed partner of other males and the income from this sacred prostitution was dedication to the Goddess. Such ladies were regarded as sacred prostitutes. Such ancient customs were prevalent in Assyria, Iraq etc. The Goddess Isis of Egypt was represented in a pillar containing a symbol of Yoni. The numerous Goddess of ancient world; Venus and Diana of Rome, Athena of Athens, Hulda of Germany may be mentioned. In ancient India many such Goddesses were prevalent in the primitive societies.

The worship of Sakti or the female principle which is the primordial factor in the creation and reproduction of the Universe, occupies a unique position in the religious system of India. Originated directly from the primitive Mother Goddess the Sakti cult gradually crpt into the mainstream of Indian religions and the indigenous fold-tribal faiths incorporating local god

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**Emergence of Sakti Worship in Odisha**

*Dr. Janmejay Choudhury*

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lingas of anionic and iconic forms, heterogeneous elements, customs, rites, beliefs, worship partners, in interesting myths and legends etc. No other religion can claim to have continuous and colorful history right from the Indus Valley civilization with richest source of mythology, tantras and numerous manifestations as Saktism. The earliest evidence of tide of Tantricism we get from the Indus Valley Civilization. “Objects unearthed at the prehistoric (c.2750 B.C) sites of the Indus Valley Civilization prove the prevalence of the cults of the father God and Mother Goddess among the pre-Aryan people of India.” This male God is
the proto-type of later Siva. He is represented in Yoga posture surrounded by animals and three visible faces with two horns. Besides several figures of mother Goddess cult which was the source of all creations of the later Trantricism and Saktism. Sir John Marshal who excavated Mohenjodaro and Harappa sites writes about the religion of the civilization in the following lines: Saivism and Saktism are the two aspects of Tantra. Saktism represents the beginning of Tantra Sadhana and Saivism is the culminating point of the spiritual march.

Saivism and Saktism, the two school of Tantra metaphysics, were the official religions of the non-Aryans of the Indus Valley Civilization who practiced various aspects of Tantra Sadhanas according to their intellectual standards. Siva and Sakti the dual deities symbolizing the two schools were their principal divine beings and worshipped. The Sakta Upanisadas raised position of Sakti to the status of world mother Viswamata, Viswambara, Viswatmita etc. the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. The Sakta Upanisada regarded her as Brahma, the idealistic monism or absolutism. Similarly the Saiva Upanisada held Sakti as the creative power of Siva. These Upanisadas introduced tantric terminologies like Bindu, Nada, Mantra, Yantra and a number of plexuses. Sakti according to the Upanisada is the ramification of the whole world and there is nothing in the Universe devoid of Sakti. The omnipotent, incomprehensible and unknowable character of the Sakti described in a hymn of the Devi Upanisada. We know the genesis of Durga as the all pervasive and all powerful world mother. This concept found fruition in the puranas. The Mahapuranas, Upapuranas, especially the Sakta Upapuranas and Tantras conceived and propitiated numerous goddesses with different modes of worship, thus enlarging the horizon of Saktism.

Odisha formed with some territorial units of ancient Odra- Utal-Kalinga-Kosal, was in the past, one of the greatest centres of Indian religions, patronized and supported by the successive royal dynasties and the people at large. It is pertinent to note here that in all cultural epochs of ancient and medieval history numberless Gods and Goddesses were conceived and propitiated. Through the process of permutation and combination many of them were dropped out of the pantheons replacing new ones; created accordingly to the needs of situations. The nucleus of Sakti cult in Odisha is traced from the Asokan (3rd century B.C) and post Asokan periods when the Tribal Gods and Goddesses like Naga-Nagi and Yaksha-Yakshi were incorporated in Buddhism. After Kalinga war (261 B.C) Kalinga became a stronghold of Buddhism. Asoka laid the foundation of art and architecture through the medium of stone. The rock-cut elephant and special Rock-edicts of the colossal Bhaskareswar Sivaling, Bell-capital and lion (all three forming parts of Asokan pillar at Bhubaneswar), the Naga-Nagi, Yaksha-Yakshi images of Sundarapada village and a few other images of this type form the vicinity of Bhubaneswar are some of the important archaeological remains of Asokan period in Odisha. The Naga-Nagi and Yaksha-Yakshi images are marked for crude workmanship with building breasts and hips, pot belly’s, five headed Snake over the head (in case of Naga-Nagi). In course of time Naga-Nagi and Yaksha-Yakshi became an important cult in Jain, Buddhist and Brahminical religions.

In the beginning of the Christian era a number of tribal deities were incorporated in Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Stambeswari,
for example, represented in the form of a pillar was adopted and worshipped by the Hindus. The Kalahandi copper plate grant of the Sulki king Tustikar relates that Stambeswari was worshipped as the tutelary deity of the Sulkis. At present such Goddess is worshipped at Aska, Sonepur, Bolangiri, Banpur and Sambalpur etc. as an important deity. A tribal Goddess, Samaleswari was adopted as the patron deity of the Chouhan Raj family.

The classical Goddesses in the forms of Mahisamarddini Durga, Saptamatrika in group and in individual manifestations, 64 Yoginis, Katyayinis, Manasa, Parvati, Lakshimi, Kali, Tara, Bhagabati, Vimala, Mangala and Charchika made their appearance in Odisha from the Gupta period and enlarged the pantheons with the addition of local godlings. The two-armed Durga holding in her right arm Sula piercing the buffalo shaped demon and the left hand pulling the tail of animal is the earliest classical Goddess worshipped as Viraja at Jajpur. Of all the forms of Sakti Mahisasamarddini became extremely popular in Odisha from 7th century onwards. The Sapta Matrukas representing the Saktis of important Gods spread sporadically in Odisha from 7th century onwards. In the Puranas Matrukas are many, but the number seven has universally accepted. The worship of Sapta Matrukas (seven Mother) was another form of Saktism during the Bhaumakaras period. The Seven Goddesses are Varahi, Indrani, Vaishnavi, Kaumari, Sivani, Brahmani and Chamunda. The deities are of two or four armed. The earliest representation of such Matrukas was found at Parsurameswar, Vaital and Mukteswar temples of Bhubaneswar.

The Sapta Matrika images have also been found at Jajpur, Belkhandi at Kalahandi, Markandeswar Tank at Puri, Solanpur of Jagatsinghpur district etc. These seven mothers are accompanied by Ganesh and Virabhadra. The iconographic peculiarity divides the Matrukas of Odisha into two broad groups earlier and later. The earlier Matrukas seem to have been in prevalence in the Sailodbhava and Bhuamakara dynasty periods and the later group with the basics as the distinctive attributes; seem to have originated in the Somavamsi period. Saptamatruka found in the modern temple of Dasaswamedha Ghat on the river of Vaitaran of Jajpur, Markandeswar tank and the image of Solanpur of Jagatsinghpur district holding basics in arms belong to the later group. There are 26 sets of Saptamatrukas and many images of Chamunda and several of Varahi developed individually as independent cults. The Matrukas were conceived as war Goddess to assist the Mahadevi in her combat with Mahisasura and his allies. Although they were born as war Goddess they are depicted as mothers holding each, a child on the lap (except Chamunda who was created in the battle field from the third eye of Durga. Matrikas were associated with child from the Somavamsi period onwards.
A significant development of Saktism took place when Tantricism made its appearance (from about 8th century A.D) and was amalgamated with Saktism. The cult of 64 Yogini was the exuberant expression of extreme form of Tantricism in about 8th century A.D. Out of the total 7 circular Yogini temples erected in India between 8th-12th century A.D., two are found in Odisha. One is at Hirapur near Bhubaneswar and other at Ranipur-Jharial of Bolangir. The 64 terrific images of Yogini enshrined in their respective niches in a circle with Bhairava at the centre created a grim atmosphere. When Tantricism was widespread Sakti was multiplied into sixty-four Manifestations.

Parvati, the consort of Siva is invariably depicted as a parswadevata in the Siva temple. She is Paribardevata, benevolent by nature. In Odisha she was raised to the status of an independent cult. The magnificent four chambered Parvati temple, enshrined with a four-armed Parvati within the complex of Lingaraj temple, suggests her pre-eminent position in the Saiva-Sakta pantheon. Lakshmi the Goddess of wealth in the Indian Hindu Villages is an important form of Sakti in Odisha. She is an auspicious symbol depicted in the Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries and in Jain architecture. She flourished as the concert of Vishnu and as an independent cult. The beautiful Lakshmi temple within the precinct of Jagannath temple at Puri in the first part of 12th century A.D., relates her high position in the Jagannath culture. Ganga and Yamuna two sacred rivers are manifested in sculptural art and found in almost all Hindu Temples. They are also depicted as Yoginis in the Yogini temple. Manasa, the Goddess of poison is very popular in folk level. The rural folk propitiate her to be free from snake bite. With the emergence of mainspring of Indian religions the Naga cult of ancient origin was relegated to a subservient position; and even in many cases the entwined Naga-Nagi was depicted as decorative motives in the temple. In the 7th/8th century a vigorous attempt was made to save the cult from ruin. Hence sprang up the Goddess Manasa, the mind born daughter of Siva. She gradually carved out a niche in the Saivite Pantheon.

Besides these important cults there are subsidiary Goddess and numerous folk Goddesses further enlarging the horizon of Saktism. Saktism mingled with Tantricism greatly highlighted the whole religious system, substantially enriches art and architecture and developed vast mass of literature interestingly mixed with legends, myths, philosophy and spectacular iconography of Goddess of multifarious nature. Thus Odisha had immense contribution to the evolution and development of Saktism. The royal patronage and popular support were greatly responsible in the growth of Indian religions. The peculiarity of Odisha is that the quintessence of all religious faith was absorbed in Sri Jagannath who stands all-pervasive and the Rastra Devata of the state.

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